

November 28, 2004–February 26, 2005

# *Meditations*

DEAD MEN WALKING: LIVING BY THE RESURRECTION

## DEAD MEN WALKING: LIVING BY THE RESURRECTION

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The devotions in this volume focus on sin and grace—and how they affect our lives.

"Dead Men Walking"—celebrated in prison language and a movie title—you see, is also the story of our lives. Once we were dead, spiritually dead—like a corpse before God, moving about but unable to make one move toward him. And sin is what did it to us.

But thankfully our spiritual biography doesn't end there. We've been made alive, regenerated, by Christ who took our sin and death to the cross and left them behind in the grave when he rose from the dead. And in that new life we—you and I—live by Christ's resurrection.

May these devotions help serve to guide us as we journey to our heavenly home.

**Lyle Albrecht**  
Editor, Volume 48

Cover photography: R. Todd Davis

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# *Meditations*

DEAD MEN WALKING: LIVING BY THE RESURRECTION

November 28, 2004–February 26, 2005

VOLUME 48

NUMBER 1

# **Dead Men Walking: Living by the Resurrection**

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through the Saturday after  
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The following pastors (listed alphabetically) wrote the devotions and prayers contained in this booklet: Lyle Albrecht, Mark Albrecht, John Brug, William Fischer, Roy Hefti, Peter Kruschel, Richard Lauersdorf, David Ponath, Charles Raasch, Reuel Schulz, Steven Staude, and Paul Wilde.

"There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. . . . Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken." (Luke 21:25,26)

### GALAXIES SHAKEN

Jesus spoke these words on Tuesday of Holy Week. It's called holy because Jesus died that week to make *us* holy. His death atoned for our sins. He redeemed us—bought us back from sin, death, and the devil. We are forgiven. No more sins. Holy.

At the time Jesus was in the temple. As he left, he warned his disciples that this beautiful man-made temple would soon be leveled to the ground. And just as the temple would be destroyed, so also would the earth be destroyed—on the Last Day.

Today is the first day of a brand new church year—Advent 1. Four weeks until Christmas. We are getting ready to celebrate Christ's first trip to earth . . . to Bethlehem . . . as a baby . . . God incarnate. It's a story of perfect love—God's love for fallen humankind. But the Advent season is also a preparation time for eternity—for Christ's second coming as the triumphant king of heaven.

The theme for this year's *Meditations* is "Dead Men Walking: Living by the Resurrection." How stark and true that is! Without Christ we are dead in sin. Each

day we are walking through the valley of the shadow of death, one step closer to the end . . . to judgment day . . . to the moment when we stand before the righteous judge. But with Christ—who died and rose again for our salvation—we live a new life. We have no fear.

The Savior then drew a startling picture for his disciples. On the day he will return, *the heavenly bodies* will be shaken! The sun, moon, and stars! The universe itself. The galaxy!

You know how a baby shakes a rattle? Now picture God shaking the galaxy!

Talk about things that can make people faint! Talk about terror! But only for those who don't know Jesus as their Savior. Judgment day is scary only for those who don't know that Christmas is about Christ's becoming true man to take our sins away. Facing a righteous God is a threat. But only to those who don't know or believe what Jesus did at the end of Holy Week.

For those of us who *do* celebrate Christmas and Good Friday and Easter, there is peace. True peace. Peace with God. Peace for eternity.

Lord Jesus, bless this season of Advent. We worship you as our Savior who took all our sins and fears away. Amen.

"At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." (Luke 21:27,28)

### JESUS ON "CLOUD NINE"!

When someone says, "He's on cloud nine," it means that he's flying high. He's in good spirits. Things are going great. But it's only an expression.

When the Bible says that we "will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory"—that's not just an expression. Nor is it a pipe dream or a made-up tale. It's a fact!

Simply put, Jesus is saying: "Stand up. Lift up. Look up. Cheer up. Your redemption is at hand!"

Can you imagine the thrill of seeing Jesus return in the clouds?! Think of the excitement that we'll share with all the saints to see our Redeemer returning in all his power and glory.

His second trip to earth, however, will be quite different from his first. The stable in Bethlehem was lowly. The cross on Calvary was agony. His death and burial were the pits of humiliation for the Son of God. But he did it all for you and me. He did it that we

might live—live on the other side of the grave.

So fellow Christians, when the Son of Man appears in all his glory, stand up and lift up your heads. Look to the clouds. You won't be able to miss him. He'll be surrounded by his angels and all his glory. Paul puts it this way: "For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever" (1 Thessalonians 4:16,17).

What comfort! What joy! We're going to heaven! And it's only a matter of time. The signs are all around us. Even now we're flying high! Things are going great!

And they will only get better—when Jesus comes back, raises us up, gives us glorified bodies, and ushers us into bliss.

Lord Jesus, our Redeemer, we're ready. We're excited. Trusting in your promises, we await your return—when we will fly with you through the clouds into the bliss of heaven. Amen.

He told them this parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees. When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near." (Luke 21:29-31)

### EVEN NATURE HAS SIGNS

"You have enough sense to know," Jesus would say to his disciples, "that when the leaves on the trees start to appear, summer is on its way. Apply the same good sense to the signs of our times. Those signs all add up to this: the kingdom of God is near."

Why do you think Jesus points to summer, when the fig trees begin to bud, rather than to autumn, when the leaves begin to turn color and fall? Easy. Summer is the season of life and joy. The dull, drab, weary winter season of life has passed by. And things grow in summer—not winter. Things are alive.

We Christians are *alive* in Christ. To summarize Paul's letter to the Romans, Christians are *dead to sin* but *alive in Christ*. "Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he

lives to God. In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Romans 6:8-11).

Alive in Christ! What power that gives us! What life it imparts to us! What meaning it adds to our everyday routines! We're not just going through the motions. Our thoughts, words, and actions are *christocentric*—that is, centered *around* Jesus. He paid for sin. It's gone. We are "dead to sin" and "alive to God in Christ Jesus." Alive. Full of life. In the joy of the summertime of our lives. For we know that the final harvest is not far off and eternal life awaits us.

In Ecclesiastes we're told that there's a season for everything: "There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot" (3:1,2).

Right now, as we await Christ's imminent return, it's time to live. For his kingdom of glory will soon be ours to enjoy. For as near as we can tell, Christ is coming very soon!

Lord Jesus, we eagerly await your return. Until then, empower us to live for you. Amen.

"Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away."  
(Luke 21:33)

### EARTH—GONE FOREVER, GOD'S WORD—NEVER

Christians believe that through Christ's death and resurrection their sins are forgiven and heaven is their home. After all, that's what God promised. "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mark 16:16).

Now wouldn't it be a dirty trick for God to tell you on judgment day: "Never mind what I told you in the Bible. I've changed the rules. Now only those who weigh less than one hundred pounds can enter heaven"?

Does a possibility like that worry you? It shouldn't. God can't and won't change his Word. He is perfect. He doesn't change. And what is true of God is true of his words and promises. What God says will always endure. God's words "will never pass away."

The meaning of Jesus' words is clear. Everything that Jesus foretold to his disciples will take place. Everything the Bible says will come true. God's Word is forever.

Not so, however, with this world or universe. "Heaven and earth will pass away"—in short, all these things which are so familiar to us, such as the universe we live in, the sky whose "air" we breathe, the earth on which we stand—in fact, all

creation—will disappear, will cease to exist. Everything man built, everything man has accomplished—all the solid, tangible things he has coveted, fought over, trusted in (yes, even the fortunes of the rich and famous)—will disappear without a trace on the great day of the Lord.

Yes, heaven and earth will pass away. But when nothing else is left, God will be left; his Word will be left. The truth revealed by the Son of God is the ultimate resource life has to offer. It is the surest, most stable thing in the whole wide world. His words, his promises, his predictions will all come true—every last one of them.

So the Christian does not merely *hope* for salvation. He *knows* he is saved by the grace of God and the blood of Christ. And the heavenly joys the Bible speaks of are more than pious dreams. Heaven is the sure and certain destiny of every child of God.

Rejoice, blessed believer, and sing your Savior's praises. Cling to his Word. It will lead you, guide you, support you—even if this unstable world begins to sway beneath your feet in times of trouble and tribulation—and lead you home to meet your Lord in glory.

Lord Jesus, we are eager to leave this world behind us and to inherit the mansions that you have prepared for us. Amen.



"Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap." (Luke 21:34)

### SO BE CAREFUL

Undoubtedly, you're spending a lot of time preparing for Christmas. And you might well be ready by December 24. But how much time have you spent preparing to meet God? Are you ready for Christ to come on the day of judgment in all his blazing glory?

And there's a related question. Are you ready to die? Are you ready for the Lord to show up and take you home?

What's that? You haven't given too much thought to it? You've been too busy? There are too many other things occupying your life?

That's just the point Jesus was making to his disciples. "Don't let your hearts get weighed down, distracted, or occupied with other things so that judgment day will come upon you unexpectedly like a trap." Then he goes on to mention three things in particular that should never weigh hearts down.

*Dissipation* is a word that we don't use too often. It means indulging in wasteful pursuit of pleasure. Simply put, it means to "carouse" or "party hearty!" One might think of college parties where there are no rules . . . and no morals either . . . where anything goes! Peter says to avoid "living in debauchery, lust, drunk-

enness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry" (1 Peter 4:3).

"Drunkenness" is a common sin that plagues our society. Having a drink is not wrong in itself (though it is for the alcoholic)—but *excessive* drinking is. Jesus presented a miraculous gift of wine to a bridal couple. But perhaps he also monitored the alcoholic intake of those hanging around the punch bowl. It's no secret that excessive alcohol loosens up moral restraints. It goes hand in hand with dissipation. Lutherans also need to be reminded of Jesus' advice.

For "the anxieties of life," we might substitute "worries." Worry robs us of the trust we are to place in God. After all, if God loved us enough to send his Son to take care of our souls, won't he also take care of our physical needs? He became true man to accomplish our salvation! He died one terrible death to open for us the doors of heaven! Why then worry about uncertainties? Why fear the future?

All three are traps that the devil, the world, and our flesh use to ensnare us. Jesus' warning is urgent: Be careful! Be prepared! Trust the Lord! He'll take care of you.

Jesus, thank you for coming to earth to take our sins away. Help us avoid all temptation to sin. Amen.

"For it will come upon all those who live on the face of the whole earth."  
(Luke 21:35)

### NOBODY ESCAPES JUDGMENT DAY

There are only a few events in the span of the world where *every-one* living at the time was or will be involved in one way or another. Let's consider three:

1. The birth of the first baby. Those present were Adam, Eve, and baby Cain (Genesis 4).

2. The Flood. Everyone—whether inside or outside the ark—was involved. While only eight people were aboard the world's largest floating zoo, every single person living at that time learned that God's threats were not to be taken lightly. The number of those lost in the universal flood is known only to God (Genesis 6).

3. Judgment Day—the day of reckoning. "We must *all* appear before the judgment seat of Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:10). Nobody escapes standing before the judge on the Last Day! Christians will not want to escape. Unbelievers will only wish they could.

Consider the fate of the unbelievers. They've lived (rather, *wasted*) their lives, refusing to believe that God sent his Son to be their Savior. Now comes *the day*. They hear God's trumpet blast and the voice of the archangel. They see person after

person after person being raised back to life. They know it's too late to repent, to seek forgiveness, to seek the Savior—for the righteous judge is already seated on his throne in all his glory.

This awesome sight puts absolute fear into their hearts! They already know the verdict that will be handed down by the One who stretched out his hands on the cross to pay for their sins too. God "has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed" (Acts 17:31).

Each of them will stand before Jesus to hear this final word from his lips: "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matthew 25:41).

Believers, however, do not fear that moment any more than they fear death itself. Jesus conquered sin. Jesus conquered death. Good Friday took care of sin. Easter took the sting out of death. Believers know and believe that.

"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you'" (Matthew 25:34).

O Jesus, thank you that we already know what you will say to us on the day we stand before you. We await the day when we will receive the inheritance you have prepared for us. Amen.

"Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man." (Luke 21:36)

## BE READY TO STAND BEFORE JESUS

Jesus' words of warning are later echoed by Peter: "Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith" (1 Peter 5:8,9).

Such warnings are to be taken seriously. Jesus, you see, has too much at stake for you not to do so. He purchased all souls on earth with his death and resurrection. That makes each of us *absolutely* precious—redeemed, as we are, by the blood of God's holy Son!

That's what Jesus' first trip to earth was all about. "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him" (John 3:17). The birth in Bethlehem was to take Jesus to the middle cross on Calvary. He was born to die—in our place. He doesn't want to lose even one soul that he redeemed.

Jesus knows that Satan won't give up. He works hard at his devious goals—constantly tempting us to sin, constantly sifting us and our faith. The devil knows our weaknesses. He has won many a victory with his sly, crafty cunning. He works extra hard on God's children.

That's why Jesus warns us, "Watch." Be on your guard. Be alert to the signs of the time. And pray. Then pray some more! Don't stop! Stay in constant communication with God. The prince of darkness is sneaky. Stay close to Jesus and his powerful Word. It's your weapon of choice. Luther put it well: "One little word can fell him."

Consider this question: Who is stronger? The devil or you? Don't kid yourself. You're no match for the devil. As a fallen angel, he has much more power than you—in and of and by yourself.

Consider the same question from a slightly different angle. Who is stronger? The devil or a Christian who has God backing him or her up? Now the answer is obvious! Just as Goliath didn't have a chance against young David, so the devil can't stand against the Christian who puts his or her trust in the Lord. The apostle James assures us, "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (James 4:7).

Then the victory is won. Come judgment day, we will stand before the Son of Man and receive the crown of everlasting life.

**Lord Jesus, empower us to fight against Satan as your soldiers. Amen.**

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Tracónitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. (Luke 3:1-3)

## GOD'S ROAD MAP FOR THE HIGHWAY TO HEAVEN

"Dad, I think we're lost. Why don't you stop and ask someone for directions?"

"No, I know where we are. I'm sure our turn is coming up just ahead."

(Somewhat later.) "Dad, I know we're lost. We passed this house at least twice before."

"Don't worry. I can feel we're getting close. It's just a matter of time now."

(Much later.) "Dad, let's just turn around and go home. It's too late now anyway."

Failure to ask for directions is usually not a matter of life or death. It usually just results in arriving at one's destination late and/or missing an appointment. There are times, however, when the results can be much more serious.

Take, for example, humankind's refusal to ask for directions to the one sure path that will lead to heaven. Instead of going to God and asking him for the directions to his perfect dwelling place, people go off in all sorts of different directions on their own.

Some think that striving for perfection is the right path to heaven. Some believe that listening to their hearts will lead them there. Others follow the crowd wherever it is going—giving little thought to where the road might eventually lead.

And where does the road lead? Every man-made path leads to eternal separation and eternal torment in hell.

That's why it's comforting to read the words of our Bible passage. Here God, through his spokesman Luke, lays out for us the path that leads to him and to heaven. In great detail, the Lord notes how "when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons" (Galatians 4:4,5).

Here God begins to unfold how his plan of salvation will win heaven for us. Here God calls us to repent—that is, to humbly acknowledge our sins and trust in him for salvation. Yes, here is the map to heaven.

**Lord God, lead me to heaven by drawing me into your Word. Thank you for sending your Son to save me. Amen.**

As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all mankind will see God's salvation.'" (Luke 3:4-6)

### THIS ROAD IS UNDER CONSTRUCTION

People who live in the northern half of America often say that there are only two seasons of the year: winter and highway construction season! And there seems to be more than a grain of truth behind that lighthearted sentiment. People who live in more temperate climates sometimes respond that their northern neighbors should count their blessings—in warmer areas the road construction season never ends!

We may grouse about the road construction delays, the roundabout detours, or the damage to our vehicles that construction causes. But we usually enjoy the results once the construction projects have been completed. A smooth, well-constructed road is a pleasure to travel.

We are only the latest generation of people to understand the need for good roads—and the painstaking process needed to construct them. Luke quotes the prophet Isaiah in describing the message of John the Baptist. "Prepare the way for the Lord," John would say, "by properly construct-

ing a highway for him in your heart—making the road straight and smooth, lowering the hills, filling in the low places."

John the Baptist readied the people of his day for the coming of the promised Savior by calling them to repentance—that is, by calling them to acknowledge their utter sinfulness before God and to trust in him for salvation. There was work to be done in their hearts—construction work that involved destroying pride, selfishness, and unbelief, as well as turning to faith in the Savior-God.

Are you ready for the season of your salvation? This is the time to begin road construction in your own heart. What obstacles need to be torn out? "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice" (Ephesians 4:31). In their place, through the power of the Spirit, construct a smooth, straight highway based on faith in your Savior Jesus Christ. "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (4:32).

**Lord Jesus, be with me as I struggle to prepare a heart that is a fit dwelling place for you. Send your Spirit to guide me and sustain me in your truth. Amen.**

John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance." (Luke 3:7,8)

### A ONE-WAY ROAD

A man I know was recently convicted of manslaughter for his role in a deadly auto accident. Witnesses testified that he had been drinking heavily before he had gotten into his car and drove down the freeway—the wrong way. He hit an oncoming vehicle—one holding a mother and her two young children. The three died instantly. He walked away with only a few scratches. His senseless act had resulted in a horrible tragedy—a fact he lived to regret.

Some of the people who came out to hear John the Baptist were much like this drunken driver who wound up driving the wrong way down the freeway—except what they were doing was even more dangerous. They obstinately refused to admit that there was anything wrong with their actions.

These people had listened to John's call to "prepare the way for the Lord . . . [and] see God's salvation" (Luke 3:4,6). But instead of repenting and acknowledging their inability to make things right with God, instead of putting their trust in him for salvation, they closed their hearts to John's call and held fast to their sinful pride and self-trust. Some of them might even have given the impression that they were changing in accord with

John's call—but their lives betrayed their lack of faith.

"You brood of vipers," John labeled these hypocrites. Now his words of judgment against them were not the holier-than-thou ranting of a self-righteous preacher. No, this judgment, though delivered by John, came from God himself. It was a solemn warning—a warning intended to make these people realize that they were heading *away from* heaven, *away from* God and not toward him—that if they did not change their ways by changing their hearts, they would find themselves separated from God forever.

The warning is clear, isn't it? Don't be caught heading the wrong way as you get ready for the Lord's appearing. Stubborn refusal to acknowledge that you are a sinner—harboring lustful thoughts because no one can see them, maintaining a sinful lifestyle because it makes you feel good, speaking ill of others because, by comparison, it makes you look good—does not lead to God. It leads *away from* him.

Heed John's call. Turn to God. Admit your sin, and trust in him for the forgiveness he has won for you through his Son. Then, in humble faith, produce fruit in keeping with repentance.

**Lord God, have mercy on me, a sinner. Renew a right spirit within me. Amen.**

[John said] "Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire." (Luke 3:8,9)

### A NARROW ROAD

D.J. was brought up in a Christian home by faithful, God-fearing parents. His whole family was active in church. Both of his parents served the congregation in any number of capacities over the years. His family was well respected and served as a model of faith for many other families.

You might guess by my use of the past tense that something happened to this family. You would be right.

It began innocently enough. After D.J. graduated from grade school, he began to hang with a new circle of friends. Rather than question him about it, his parents chose to ignore the changes in D.J.'s behavior—the kind of language he used, the hours he kept, the places he went, and the way he treated them.

When D.J. was old enough to get a part-time job, they allowed him to work exclusively on weekends so as "not to interfere with his schoolwork." It didn't bother them that he could no longer get to worship services or other church activities.

It wasn't long before D.J. left church altogether. The dis-

ruptions he caused tore the family apart. Soon they left the church too.

The point of this story is not that church-going people are the only good people in the world. The point is that sometimes we are like the descendants of Abraham, whom John warns in our text. We, like they, might think that since we're card-carrying members of a church, we could never fall. We would be wrong.

Having the right religious pedigree, a Christ-filled home throughout youth, membership in a Christian congregation, a relative in the public ministry, or even a reserved pew in our church is no guarantee that we will remain on the one path that leads to heaven.

Paul exhorted the Philippian Christians "to work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12). He echoed the admonition of John the Baptist to the religious people of his day.

These are words for us too. In humility come before God daily and confess your sins. In humble joy trust him when he says, "Your sins are forgiven."

**Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Amen.**

"What should we do then?" the crowd asked. John answered, "The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same." (Luke 3:10,11)

### TRAVELING WELL—PART 1

In past ages traveling anywhere required thoughtful, careful preparation. A person's life could depend on the route that was chosen, the provisions that were furnished, and the weapons that were taken along to protect oneself in case of danger. Even in today's world—with our easy access to a vast array of reliable modes of transportation and transportation systems—it's important to plan our trips thoughtfully.

It's no different as we travel on the highway that leads to heaven. The road we travel is full of danger. Satan wants to keep us from reaching our destination. Unbelieving friends and acquaintances want to distract us from the path. And our own hearts often grow weary and tired and want to give up along the way.

Given such formidable barriers, how can we expect to make it to our final destination? The truth is that if it were left solely up to us to travel the highway to heaven, we'd never make it. But, as John the Baptist points out to us, we're not traveling alone.

Our Savior-God has provided us with the map that leads us on

the right route. He points us in the right direction by calling us to repentance. He provides the spiritual nourishment and encouragement that we need to continue along the way. Through his Word he guides us in "paths of righteousness for his name's sake" (Psalm 23:3). He shows how much he favors us by helping us to live lives that are in harmony with our words of repentance and faith.

John tells us that we have the opportunity to exercise our faith in Jesus—to produce fruits of repentance—by the way we care for others. In meeting the needs of others, we are living out the faith that God has worked in our hearts. We are, by God's Spirit, traveling along the smooth, straight, level highway that prepares us for life with him forever.

In what ways is God leading you this Christmas season? Are there people in need around you? Can you support God's missions at home and away with special offerings? How will you exhibit love in response to the one who has loved you?

**Lord Jesus, you have filled my heart with your love. As I travel toward you, help me show your love by what I do for others. Amen.**



Tax collectors also came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?" "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them. Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?" He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay." (Luke 3:12-14)

## TRAVELING WELL—PART 2

Traveling well on the highway that leads to heaven means being guided along that path by our Savior-God. He enables us to travel well by helping us to travel safely. And the safest way to travel is, of course, to have him at our side—helping us to think, say, and do the things that keep us on the path that leads to him.

Among the people who came to hear John's message of repentance were two groups that the Pharisees regarded as "outcasts"—tax collectors and soldiers. They were led by the Holy Spirit to see that they were not righteous before God—as God demanded they must be. They were sinners. They were separated from God because of their sin, and, left to themselves, they would be lost forever.

The Holy Spirit refreshed their hearts with the good news that God had come to make things right again between them and him. Through his Son, who was about to appear, their sins would be paid for. They *could* trust God to do this for them. And by the working of the Holy Spirit, they *did* trust God to do this through the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

Now that God had created in them a hunger for a change in their lives, they were bothered by their occupations. They wanted to do what was pleasing to God. But how could their jobs mesh with God's will? Tax collectors earned their living by overcharging taxpayers. Extortion and bullying were tools of the occupying Roman soldiers' trade. Should they quit their jobs?

No, John said. But go about your work in a God-pleasing way. Collect only what the government requires. Don't bully people or accuse them falsely or shake them down. Rather, serve God honestly—whatever your station in life.

Friend, how will you live your life in Christ? What will you do that expresses your love for him who first loved you and, at the same time, is in keeping with the role or station in life in which God has placed you?

Paul pictured a Christ-centered life with these words: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law" (Galatians 5:22,23). Yes, travel in that Spirit as you walk the highway to heaven.

**Jesus, lead us on till our rest is won. Amen. (CW 422:1)**

The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." (Luke 3:15-17)

## THE ROAD BEGINS AND ENDS WITH JESUS

Throughout this week we have heard the message that John the Baptist directed to people of every age. It's a message of exhortation, encouragement, and good news.

We've been reminded that there's no way for us to travel safely on the highway that leads to heaven nor is there any hope for us to reach our final destination if we try to do so on our own, relying solely on our own strength. We can't do it ourselves because we're sinners. We have neither the strength nor the desire to live the perfect lives that are required for safe passage to heaven.

We've also heard the great good news that John shared with the people gathered on the banks of the Jordan—that the kingdom of heaven was indeed near. Jesus came, as promised, to establish his kingdom and to do for us what we could not do for ourselves. He took away our sins by accepting the punishment for them himself.

Through faith in him for the forgiveness of sins we are placed

squarely on the path that leads to heaven. Through the preaching of God's law and gospel we are kept on that path. Through connection to the gospel in Word and sacrament we gain the nourishment we need to remain strong for the journey.

So what is the most important lesson for us? John shows us in his answer to the people who questioned if he were the Christ, the Messiah himself: "One more powerful than I will come."

John's message—the focus of our devotions, the driving force on the highway to heaven—is always and only Jesus. "Fix [y]our eyes on Jesus," the writer of Hebrews says (12:2).

When Jesus is before us, when he dwells in us through our continual connection to his Word, when he's our companion through all of life's trials and temptations, when he's the focus of all our activities, our words, and our thoughts—then we travel well and safely to his home . . . our home.

**Jesus, lead us on . . . to our fatherland. Amen. (CW 422:1)**

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee. (Luke 1:26)

## THE MYSTERY WHICH CANNOT BE IGNORED

"It's the greatest day since creation!" That's what President Nixon said in the summer of 1969 when the Apollo astronauts landed on the moon. His good friend Billy Graham reminded the president of Christmas and Easter.

People don't talk much about the moon landing these days. We certainly don't celebrate it every year.

But Christmas! Gabriel's announcement is what Paul called "the mystery of godliness," "the hidden truth of our religion" (AAT) that "he [God] appeared in a body" (1 Timothy 3:16).

This mystery of our faith—that God himself appeared in the flesh and walked among us as one of us—is a mystery which can't be ignored. Did you pick up a newspaper this morning? look at a calendar? write out a check? log on to a computer? Then you know that the Western world, gladly or grudgingly, admits that this event split history into two parts—B.C. (before Christ) and A.D. (in the year of the Lord).

One third of the world claims some sort of allegiance to this child conceived in the womb of a virgin two thousand years ago. Other religious leaders have come and gone. But if, as the

Scriptures say, "men swear by someone greater than themselves" (Hebrews 6:16), when is the last time you heard someone swear by the name of some other religious or world leader?

Who smashes his thumb with a hammer and hollers, "Mahatma Gandhi!"? Who down at the factory curses with a shout of "Confucius!"? Who takes in vain the name of Thomas Jefferson? But the name of Jesus Christ is both worshiped and abused. Whether in humble faith or arrogant unbelief, this "mystery of godliness" that God became man and yet remained God can't be ignored.

When his pain was talking, the ancient sufferer Job demanded that God come down and see for himself how bad things were. He asked God: "Do you have eyes of flesh? Do you see as a mortal sees?" (10:4).

The answer, ever since Christmas, is yes! God does have eyes of flesh—in the person of Jesus Christ. Yes! God does see as a mortal sees—in the person of Jesus Christ. Laced in this mystery which can't be ignored is the mystery of why God did not ignore us but loved us enough to become one of us and to come looking for us.

**Lord Jesus, grant me a grateful heart that never ignores the mystery of what you became for me and what you did for me. Amen.**

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God." (Luke 1:26-30)

### THE MYSTERY OF A LOWLY MOTHER

God didn't send the angel Gabriel to Rome or Athens. He didn't send him to the Holy City of Jerusalem. He sent him to the pleasant little village of Nazareth in Galilee. Galilee was not wine and caviar country. It was beer and pretzel territory, home to unsophisticated farmers and tradesmen and fishermen—hardly the expected locale for one sent by God.

God did not send Gabriel to the richly robed daughter of a high priest but to a lowly virgin named Mary. She was betrothed not to a prince but to the village carpenter—Joseph.

Twice the angel tells this lowly maiden that she has found favor with God. This word for "favor" in the New Testament is the same as the word for "grace." This favor, or grace, is God's undeserved love for sinners.

So it is not "Hail, Mary, full of grace" in the sense that Mary has grace to bestow on others but "Greetings, you who are highly favored," that is, greatly "graced" by God to be the mother of the

Messiah, the Savior. The grace is not Mary's, but God's. The gift is not hers, but his. She is truly blessed, highly privileged to bear in her body the Christ.

Mary's reaction to Gabriel's announcement shows she understood this. The Christmas cards are not on target when they portray the annunciation as a peaceful and serene scene. The Bible says that she was "greatly troubled" and perplexed by this sudden appearance of the angel and especially by the greeting of God's undeserved love that went with it.

The mystery of our Lord's lowly mother is a mystery that extends to each of us. Paul said: "Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things . . . the weak things . . . the lowly things . . . so that no one may boast" (1 Corinthians 1:26-29).

What love! God chose Mary!  
What love! God chose you and me!

**Heavenly Father, thank you for the mystery of your undeserved love! Amen.**

You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. (Luke 1:31)

### THE MYSTERY OF THIS CHILD'S NAME

New parents ask, "What shall we name the baby?" Some borrow the name of a father or a mother, a grandfather or a grandmother. Some debate whether they should choose a traditional name or a more modern one. Some prefer biblical names. Others opt for celebrity names.

To people in biblical times, names were more than mere titles to designate one child from another. Parents often named their children for characteristics they saw in them—or at least hoped to see in them some day. Sometimes they named a child for the circumstances that surrounded the child's birth—whether it involved a time of trouble or a time of joy. So the child's name was often a message in miniature.

For instance, mother Eve may have thought that she already held the promised Savior in her arms when she named her first-born son Cain—"gotten" or "acquired"—as though to say, "I got him!" But her hope turned to disappointment. She named her second son Abel—"breath, vanity, meaninglessness, disappointment." (Imagine your mother calling you for supper: "Hey! Disappointment!") But it wasn't Abel who turned out to be the dis-

appointment. "By faith he [Abel] still speaks, even though he is dead" (Hebrews 11:4).

Our Lord's name sends a message too. The angel Gabriel tells Mary, "You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus." Jesus is the New Testament version of the Old Testament name Joshua. It means, "The Lord is salvation."

There may have been a lot of little boys running about the streets of Israel who went by the name *Yeshua*—Joshua—Jesus. That name would remind pious Jewish parents of where their salvation came from.

For Mary, the name Jesus would mean much more than this. Jesus would himself be the Lord who would bring salvation to his people. What a mystery is unraveled for you and me in this child's name! The angel explained it to Joseph: "You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21).

You and I know what those sins are—the embarrassing baggage of a lifetime, lives once lived in darkness. This child's name pardons those sins, lifts that baggage, and lights the lamp. How sweet that name sounds!

How sweet the name of Jesus sounds in a believer's ear! It soothes our sorrows, heals our wounds, and drives away all fear. Amen. (CW 358:1)

He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. (Luke 1:32)

### THE MYSTERY OF THE GOD-MAN

Mahatma Gandhi, the Hindu "holy man," became somewhat of a 20th-century cult figure. Martin Luther King Jr. traced his philosophy of nonviolence to him. Gandhi, in turn, claimed to have great respect for Jesus and said that he drew on Jesus' teachings to bolster his philosophy of nonviolence and simple living.

But Gandhi set limits. He said: "It was more than I could believe that Jesus was the only incarnate Son of God and that only he who believed in him would have everlasting life. . . . I could accept Jesus as a martyr, an embodiment of sacrifice, and a divine teacher—but not as the most perfect man ever born."

During the Christmas season we often hear even the most morally bankrupt entertainers sing the old Christmas carols that call Jesus Lord and Savior. Some Christmas greetings contain the familiar paragraph: "Twenty wide centuries have come and gone . . . and all the armies that ever marched, and all the navies that were ever built, and all the parliaments that ever sat, and all the kings that ever reigned—all of

these put together have not affected the life of man upon this earth as powerfully as has that one solitary life."

But for all the tipping of the hat to Jesus at Christmas, many stop short of calling Jesus what Gabriel called him: "the Son of the Most High." They will only say that Jesus was a wonderful prophet, a paragon of virtue and morality.

But Jesus himself did not leave this option of a middle ground open to us. He said, "If you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins" (John 8:24). He said, "Before Abraham was born, I am" (8:58). He said, "I and the Father are one" (10:30). He said: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (14:6).

The gospel reveals the mystery of a Savior who is both God and man. Only as true God could he bear the weight of the world's sin and make his sacrificial death count for every son and daughter of Adam and Eve. Only as true man could he live the life we have failed to live and be nailed to a cross for the crimes we have done.

"Lord Jesus, you are my righteousness; I am your sin. You became what you were not and made me to be what I was not." (Martin Luther) Amen.

He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end. (Luke 1:32,33)

### THE MYSTERY OF THIS CHILD'S KINGDOM

We Americans are an independent bunch. We declared our independence from kings long ago. So why, then, do we still find comfort in having Jesus as our King? Perhaps it's because we all long for the kind of king this world has never known. King David was a good king—a man after God's own heart. But even he was a disappointment—to himself, to his people, and to his God. King Arthur was a renowned king—but he and his kingdom of Camelot are only a myth.

But what if there were a king with absolute power who was not corrupted by that power? What if this king used his power—not for himself but for the good of his people? What if this king finally triumphed over all that is wrong and set everything right? What if this king's promises were not empty promises but actually came to pass? Such a king the Lord God promised his people. Such a king Gabriel tells Mary is her child—one whose “kingdom will never end.”

The Jews had come to look for a kingdom of this earth. To their

minds the phrase *kingdom of heaven* brought pictures of bright banners, glittering armies, and the power and pomp and riches of David and Solomon's day. To Jewish zealots the kingdom meant flashing swords and the spilled blood of their enemies.

But Jesus said to Governor Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36). Jesus did not come to Christianize the governments of Herod or Pilate or Caesar. Nor did he counsel the oppressed masses to rise up and throw off their chains. Rather, he said: “The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because the kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:20,21).

The mystery of Christ's kingdom, this child's kingdom, is that it comes softly and invisibly. The Holy Spirit enthrones Christ in souls through the gospel. Christ's everlasting kingdom comes when shepherds and wise men and you and I are conquered by the Word and sacraments and when our hearts bow in humble faith to him who is the King of kings.

Ah, dearest Jesus, holy Child, make Thee a bed, soft, undefiled, within my heart, that it may be a quiet chamber kept for Thee. Amen. (TLH 85:13)

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God." (Luke 1:34-37)

### THE MYSTERY OF THE VIRGIN BIRTH

"Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great: He [God] appeared in a body" (1 Timothy 3:16). This mystery, or "hidden truth of our religion" (AAT) is tied up with the truth we confess in the Apostles' Creed—that Jesus was "conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary."

Sadly, many mainline churches have long ago abandoned the doctrine of Christ's virgin birth. If you press them on it, some may even say what their liberal seminary textbooks actually print—the sacrilege that Jesus may have been conceived in a one night stand with a Roman soldier passing through town.

Such a theory is blasphemous. More than that: To deny the virgin birth on the grounds that it is too supernatural to swallow or to compare it to myths of the ancient Greeks and Romans compels doubters to deny all the other miraculous events of our salvation. Whoever rejects the Christmas account as legend must, to be consistent, reject the Easter account of our Lord's resurrection

as well. Remember what Paul said about that? "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins" (1 Corinthians 15:17).

Talk show host Larry King was once asked, If you could choose anyone in history to interview, whom would you choose? King, a liberal Jew, replied that he would like to interview Jesus Christ to learn if he was really born of a virgin. King realized that a positive answer would change all of history because that would mean all opposition to Jesus Christ would be futile. King also thought that if Jesus said he was not virgin born, then Christianity itself would be futile.

Even the skeptical Larry King framed the issue of Christmas better than many modern clergy. Our Savior's identity as true God and perfect man is built on this miraculous mystery of the virgin birth.

At the *last interview*, our Savior himself will be the one to ask the questions. Let's not wait until then to realize that all opposition to him is indeed useless.

**I praise you, Lord Jesus, for the mystery of your virgin birth! Amen.**



"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her. (Luke 1:38)

## THE MYSTERY OF FAITH THAT WELCOMES THIS CHILD

Mary accepted the assignment of the ages. "I am the Lord's servant," she said. "May it be to me as you have said."

The young girl knew what she would be subjecting herself to. A small town like Nazareth could be very cruel. Tongues would wag. Rumors would spread. Joseph would find out. Skeptical townspeople would find the explanation of her pregnancy hard to swallow.

More than one person has observed that, had Mary lived in our day, it's doubtful whether Jesus would have been allowed to enter this world. Mary's pregnancy—in a lower income home and with the father not immediately coming forward—may have been terminated.

Mary herself—heard talking about "the Holy Spirit overshadowing her"—would have been

referred for psychiatric care, thus making the case for ending the pregnancy even stronger. Many in our time, who never needed a Savior more, would not have allowed One to be born.

But Mary accepted the miracle, the mystery. She welcomed this child despite the pain it would bring her. In humble faith she welcomed this Savior of the world as *her* Savior too.

An old church father once said, "Though Christ be born a thousand times, he is not born if he is not born in us."

"The mystery of godliness" that God himself "appeared in a body" (1 Timothy 3:16) to redeem the whole world is of no personal benefit if you and I are not brought to faith in this Savior.

The mystery of faith welcomes this child not only as the Savior of the world but as our Savior too.

Welcome to earth, Thou noble Guest, through whom the sinful world is blest! Thou com'st to share my misery; what thanks shall I return to Thee? Ah, dearest Jesus, holy child, make Thee a bed, soft, undefiled, within my heart, that it may be a quiet chamber kept for Thee. Amen. (TLH 85:8,13)

At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!" (Luke 1:39-42)

### IT'S TIME TO HURRY!

Think back to a memorable Christmas morning. You awakened and realized it was Christmas. You hurried from your room, perhaps in eager anticipation to see the gifts placed under the tree, perhaps looking forward to using a gift you had already opened the night before. Either way you were excited and in a hurry to enjoy Christmas Day.

Before the very first Christmas, Mary was in a hurry too. The angel Gabriel had brought her astounding news. Through the glorious, almighty power of God, she was to become the mother of God's Son. And as a sign that this would happen exactly as promised, Gabriel gave her another bit of good news—her elderly cousin Elizabeth was pregnant too. Mary's mind must have been spinning with surprise and excitement over how God's long-standing promises concerning the Savior were coming true.

So Mary hurried away to visit Elizabeth. Arriving in the hill country of Judea, she discovered that the angel's words were as good as gold. God had performed his word—Elizabeth was expecting. How

encouraging and assuring this news proved to be to Mary's faith.

Will you be hurrying this coming week? With Christmas only days away, it is the season for hurrying. Write the greeting cards. Find and wrap the gifts. Bake the holiday favorites. But in your holiday rush, don't hurry past the most important part of Christmas!

Rather, in this season of hurry and haste, be sure to hurry away—as Mary did—to the promises of God. Take time and make time to hear and ponder God's amazing grace and love for you. He who rules heaven and earth is never too hurried to strengthen your faith and bring joy to your heart through his Word.

Marvel that God's Son would come to love and serve for you and for all. Find in his forgiving love true peace and rest. Rejoice that your Savior came from heaven so that you might be his own.

Yes, hurry to those truths again and again. Each time you do, you will be richly blessed. Each time you do, a smile of joy will light up your face.

**Lord Jesus, in these busy days, help me remember what is most important. Amen.**

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!" (Luke 1:41,42,45)

### BLESSED BY THE CHILD

The moment Mary arrived at Elizabeth's house, Elizabeth welcomed her with a joyous greeting. "Filled with the Holy Spirit," Elizabeth knew that Mary was to be the mother of the long-awaited Savior. And so she said, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!" How these words must have strengthened Mary's faith.

Out of all the women in world history, Mary was chosen to be the mother of the promised Savior. Why? Why did God choose to honor her? Was there something special on her résumé?

The words Mary used to respond to Elizabeth's greeting tell us that Mary knew that hers was a completely unearned privilege—a gift of God's undeserved love. She went on and on about all the great things God had done for her. Her lips overflowed with joyful praise to God for the great honor he bestowed upon her. Not a word of her own claim or merit found expression in her song.

She recognized that her greatest blessing was the one Elizabeth

had mentioned: "Blessed is the child you will bear." The little life developing in her womb would be her rescuer from sin and death. Her baby would be her Savior! How Mary must have marveled at God's plan to bless her—even as he used her to bless the world with a Savior.

God's plan to bless us is no less special. The faithful God who chose Mary for his purpose has also chosen us for his purpose. As part of his eternal plan, he chose us in Christ to be "holy and blameless in his sight" (Ephesians 1:4). With Baptism's water and powerful promises, he clothed us in Christ and adopted us into his family. Day by day he forgives us and assures us of his love in his life-giving Word. His purpose is for us to give glory and honor to him. His plan is for us to share his love in the places where we live and work in his world.

All of this is from the blessed child of Mary. The arrival of the Christ Child has changed our lives too. In Jesus our Savior, we, like Mary, are truly blessed.

**Heavenly Father, help us to share the blessings of our Savior as we rejoice in your great saving love. Amen.**

And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." (Luke 1:46,47)

## PROCLAIM THE GREATNESS OF THE LORD

Mary was experiencing amazing blessings. God was causing a new life to grow in her virgin womb. Her Savior was about to be born. And, as unbelievable as it all must have seemed, God gave her the faith to believe that with him all things are possible. No wonder Mary sang out in joy, "My soul glorifies the Lord." Mary, with her whole being, was extolling the greatness of God.

In times of doubt or fear, do you ever underestimate God's greatness? Do you ever take his greatness for granted? Then spend a few moments considering the greatness of your Lord—his might, his mercy, his holiness, his love. Is God's forgiveness great enough? Is your heart troubled over some sin you just never thought you'd ever commit? Or over one that you vowed you'd never fall into again? Can God forgive those?

Remember why Jesus was born. "The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin" (1 John 1:7). Jesus loves all sinners and shed his blood and died for all. That includes you. His forgiveness is always greater than your sin.

Is God powerful enough to assure you? Perhaps this Christmas finds you worried about a loved one stationed in a danger-

ous, faraway place. Perhaps you're concerned about a loved one struggling with a terminal illness. Or you may be wondering about your own personal safety amid the senseless violence of the world.

Remember, the one born of Mary is Emmanuel—God with us. Though now he is unseen, he is always near. "I am with you always," Jesus assures us (Matthew 28:20). His powerful, protecting care covers you and those you love.

Is God great enough to comfort you? Perhaps this Christmas finds you missing a loved one who is no longer here after so many Christmases with you. The very first Christmas found God's Son faraway from his heavenly home—so that all who believe in him can be home for the holidays forever with him in heaven. Because of Jesus, you and I and all others who die in Christ can look ahead to heaven's endless joy and perfect peace. There is no comfort greater than his promise: "With the Lord forever" (1 Thessalonians 4:17).

The Lord has shown and continues to display his greatness. That's why Mary sang. That's why the angels gave glory. That's why every voice can join in proclaiming, "My soul glorifies the Lord."

**Lord Jesus, let me never forget the greatness of your love and mercy. Lead me to glorify you always. Amen.**

And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name." (Luke 1:46,47,49)

## YOUR SAVIOR

A few days before Christmas, a seven-year-old boy woke up crying. His mother heard him and came to his room. "I was dreaming about Christmas," he said. "We were all by the tree, and everyone else was getting presents. But there were none for me."

"It's only a dream. Don't worry," Mom said. To help him be sure, she took him to the living room and showed him the gift under the tree that had his name on the tag.

As the virgin Mary thought of God's promises and the baby developing in her womb, she said, "My Savior." Mary knew God's greatest gift to the world was also for her. This holy child of promise was *her* gift, *her* Savior.

As the time comes to draw near Bethlehem's manger again this year, be sure to realize two things about Mary's baby—who he is and *whose* he is.

Who is this child? His name announces his identity. "Give him the name Jesus," the angel told stepfather Joseph, "because he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). The name Jesus means "Savior." Jesus is the

rescuer sent from heaven. He is the divine lifeguard for a world drowning in sin. He is the heavenly warrior for a world held hostage by Satan's tempting power—a warrior who deflected every attack of the devil and destroyed his power.

Jesus was born to offer his holy blood as the ransom for unholy sinners. With his perfect life, with his innocent death, and with his resurrection victory over death, he accomplished his mission. Yes, he is the Savior.

And *whose* is he? To whom and for whom did he come? If there were a gift tag on Bethlehem's manger, it would read: "From God to you!" He came not only for some people or for most people. He came for all—for the world. And he came for you. No matter how many or how great your sins are, Jesus came to pay for your sins. In him you are God's child. His heavenly home is your eternal home. He is *your* Savior.

Look in the manger. Heaven's greatest gift is yours. Along with Mary, rejoice and say with certainty, "My spirit rejoices in God *my* Savior."

Heavenly Father, you had no trouble thinking of something we needed to give us for Christmas. Our need was obvious to you. Thank you for Jesus, our Savior. Amen.

He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. (Luke 1:51,52)

### LIFTED UP BY THE SAVIOR'S LOVE

Two neighbors try to outdo each other as they decorate their yards with miles and miles of blinking Christmas lights and colorful figurines. A friend at work is upset because she received a much less valuable gift than the one she purchased for the office gift exchange. The mood at the family holiday gathering gets ugly when two relatives resume a long-standing feud. Pride doesn't take time off for the holidays.

Sad to say, pride too often sits on the throne of our hearts and makes its presence known in our attitudes and actions. Not only is such pride and arrogance unappealing to others—it is intolerable to God as well.

God's Word for today about "scatter[ing] those who are proud" calls us to repentance. Pride and our Savior can't live side by side in our hearts. Pride fills us full of ourselves. It leaves no room for the forgiveness and love of Jesus.

The truth is that we have no reason for pride. We're all sinners. We've all fallen short of God's demands. We all need God's forgiveness. None of us is more

deserving of God's love than another. Emptied of our goodness and self-importance, we realize we can't lift ourselves up before God. God must lift us up to him. Looking to his throne in heaven and seeking his mercy, we rejoice to find a Savior who humbled himself to lift us up with his love.

There was nothing proud about the Christ Child. He who created the heavens was not too proud to make his home with us. He did not consider it beneath his dignity to become one of us—even to coo and cry like a helpless infant. He was not too proud to hang shamefully suspended between earth and heaven as he made our sin and guilt his own. From the manger to the cross, he humbly served.

Once again we rejoice as the humble child of Christmas comes near to fill our hearts with his selfless, serving love. This humble love pushes pride from our hearts and lifts us up to lives filled with his gifts of peace, patience, humility, and forgiveness.

In Christ we are lifted up to the highest privilege of all!

Lord Jesus, you came to humbly serve as my Savior. Remove all pride from me, and let my words and life proclaim your love. Amen.

He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. (Luke 1:53)

### A DAY FILLED WITH GOOD THINGS

The Sherman family had a special Christmas Eve custom that involved their nativity set. In the weeks before Christmas, the nativity figures were set in place. Mary, Joseph, the manger, the shepherds, and their sheep were all carefully positioned. But the manger itself was left empty. Baby Jesus was missing.

On Christmas Eve the youngest child unwrapped a small package. The figure of baby Jesus was inside. The whole family watched as baby Jesus was placed in the manger. Once the manger was filled, the Shermans opened the rest of their gifts.

This Christmas Eve we are privileged to look back to ancient Bethlehem. With eyes of faith we see that the manger was filled with God's best and greatest gift. And now it's time for us to open more gifts. Not the gifts under the tree—but the gifts Jesus' mother, Mary, spoke of: "He has filled the hungry with good things."

Who are the hungry? We are. Cursed by our sins and trapped by death, we hunger for good news. What good news does God have for us?

First, we can be sure that God's Word is dependable and true. For thousands of years people waited

for God to keep his promises and send the Savior. God kept those promises. His Word is sure and certain. We can trust everything he says. The baby's presence in the manger assures us that every promise of God is true.

Second, we can be sure we have a Savior. The one filling the manger is no ordinary baby. This is God's own Son, the one who is "true God from true God . . . of one being with the Father" as the Nicene Creed declares.

This child, though weak and helpless in appearance, is our heavenly warrior, our champion sent to resist Satan. This little baby is our only hope to break the stranglehold of death and to free us from our guilt and sin.

As our eyes stop to stare at this child's little hands, our eyes of faith move on to see those hands grown and pierced on the cross and then raised in glory again. From those hands now come all good things for our hungry souls—peace, joy, forgiveness, and life for today and forever.

The manger scene is filled to overflowing with God's saving love. As we listen, angelic good news fills our ears and our hearts and our souls—"A Savior has been born to you" (Luke 2:11).

Lord Jesus, thank you for filling my hungry soul with all good things. Amen.

He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers. (Luke 1:54,55)

### GOD HAS REMEMBERED

Did you remember to do everything you intended to do this Christmas? Did you remember to get all the gifts you needed? Or were you embarrassed when someone surprised you with a gift and you had nothing to give in return? Did you remember to bake everyone's holiday favorites?

Whether you remembered everything or not, Christmas is all about the fact that God remembered. Think of all the promises God had to remember. Just moments after Adam and Eve's first sin, God promised an offspring of the woman who would crush Satan's power. Through the prophet Isaiah, God promised that the virgin would be with child. Through Micah, God identified Bethlehem as the Savior's birthplace. God assured his Old Testament people—mired down in hopelessness and trouble—"I will not forget you" (Isaiah 49:15).

Not one of God's promises—from Genesis to Malachi—was forgotten. With his own sinless Son now in the manger, God was announcing, "I have remembered to send the Savior." Angels sang, shepherds rejoiced, and Mary's heart overflowed with joy and wonder—all because God remembered his mercy and kept the promises he had made.

As we gaze in wide-eyed wonder at the manger this Christmas Day, we too rejoice that God remembered.

What did he remember? That because of our sins we have no hope without the Savior. That we can't erase even one spot of guilt from our consciences. That we can't do one single thing to earn his favor. That we need his mercy, his free and undeserved love.

God remembered. Look again in the manger. Wrapped in smooth, soft baby skin is the Lord God in human flesh—the Lord God who came to have mercy on you. He came to live and serve, to suffer and die, and to live again and forever—for you. See in this little one the perfect payment—sent by God from heaven to earth to forgive every sin.

Rejoice in the peace he has won for you. Kneel down with the shepherds and marvel at love so amazing, so divine—love that reaches out from that manger and embraces you even now. Here in God's merciful love is strength for your faith—strength to grow and love and serve. In your Savior is life for today and forever.

All those gifts are yours because God remembered. Merry Christmas? Merry Christmas, indeed!

**Heavenly Father, thank you for your saving gift of love and mercy. Amen.**



Every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. When he was twelve years old, they went up to the Feast, according to the custom. (Luke 2:41,42)

### JESUS AND THE PASSOVER: A PERFECT FIT

Readers have been entertained over the years by renowned authors Charles Dickens and Mark Twain. Their major characters—Nicholas Nickleby, Tom Sawyer, David Copperfield, and Huck Finn—were boys roughly about the age of Jesus at the time of this incident recorded in Scripture, which took place between his birth and the beginning of his public ministry at age 30. But their stories can't hold a candle to the events connected with the 12-year-old Jesus visiting Jerusalem.

Indeed, Bible truth will always be superior to fiction—even fiction composed by literary geniuses like Twain and Dickens. At first glance, however, Jesus' going to Jerusalem with his parents seems to be about as bland, as boring, as one can imagine. But combine what God's Word reveals to us about Jesus with the Feast of the Passover, and what seems at first to be rather ordinary becomes powerful and precious gospel truth.

For this "ordinary" 12-year-old from Nazareth is also true God—confessed by Christians in the fourth-century Athanasian Creed as follows: "We believe and confess that our Lord Jesus-Christ,

God's Son, is both God and man. He is God, eternally begotten from the nature of the Father, and he is man, born in time from the nature of his mother, fully God, fully man. . . ."

Our minds struggle to comprehend Jesus' unique God-man person. And it's equally daunting to understand how Jesus celebrated the Passover—which for centuries was provided by God to prepare his people for the God-man's coming and crucifixion. Indeed, Jesus, the Lamb of God, kept the promise the Lord gave to the Israelites in Exodus chapter 12 by shedding his blood on Calvary to save sinners. Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross perfectly fulfilled the prophecy connected with the Lord's passing over homes marked with lambs' blood.

We wonder how aware Jesus' parents were when they participated in the Passover Feast of their son's connection to that event. But instead of wasting time wondering about their awareness of Jesus' perfectly filling the Passover prophecy as the Lamb of God, we should rather give thanks to God for revealing today how Jesus and the Passover fit together perfectly.

**Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world. Have mercy on us. Amen.**

Every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. When he was twelve years old, they went up to the Feast, according to the custom. (Luke 2:41,42)

### PERFECT PARENTS FOR THE PERFECT SON

Having lived with children during their terrible twos and their naughty, often nasty, nines, as well as with rambunctious, rebellious, back-talking teens, I find it hard to even imagine having a perfect, completely sinless son—the privilege enjoyed by Joseph and Mary.

There's no question that Jesus was perfectly sinless. In Scripture Jesus is described as "one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet . . . without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). And Jesus himself challenged his enemies, "Can any of you prove me guilty of sin?" (John 8:46).

How important is this? Well, if Jesus had been guilty of any sin, he could not have been our Savior. And we could not rest our hope for eternal life upon him.

But what about Jesus' parents? Were they perfect? Were they sinless? Yes and no! Yes, they were the perfect parents for Jesus because God chose them and enabled them to care for Jesus until the time came for him to begin his public ministry. But no—they themselves were not perfect, that is, holy and sinless. And so, while they are to be honored for the blessing God bestowed upon them, they are not to be worshiped or prayed to.

Nevertheless, Mary and Joseph, though not perfect, serve as excellent role models for 21st-century parents. Early on they had Jesus circumcised. Through this Old Testament sacrament he became a member of God's covenant people and was placed under the law—a law he was to fulfill for us through his sinless life. Forty days after his birth they faithfully followed God's will and presented Jesus to the Lord God.

Following Jewish religious practice, Mary and Joseph would have begun Jesus' religious instruction with simple prayers and Scripture passages when he was three years old. At age 6 they would have sent him to synagogue school, where he learned God's Word and was taught reading and writing. When Jesus turned 12, they saw to it that he became a Son of the Law. And as faithful and obedient children of God, they took Jesus with them to celebrate the Feast of the Passover at the temple. The joy they found in worshipping the Lord was something they did not want Jesus to miss.

How much blessing would rest on our families if our parents were all as devout and faithful as Mary and Joseph!

**Lord Jesus, bless us and our children. Amen.**

After the Feast was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. Thinking he was in their company, they traveled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. After three days they found him. (Luke 2:43-46)

## PERHAPS JESUS' PARENTS WEREN'T SO PERFECT

For 12 years Jesus' parents seemed to be perfect, chosen by God to bring him into life at Bethlehem and to give him a solid, safe, and stable childhood in Nazareth of Galilee. But that picture-perfect performance by Jesus' parents suddenly was marred when "Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it."

This incident reminds me of the time my family and I headed for home from a vacation cabin. Fortunately, I decided to take a final lap on the scenic road that encircled the lake, because when I returned to the cottage site, there was our youngest son by the side of the road—looking forlorn and close to tears. Incredibly, he had been forgotten. It's now an amusing part of our family lore, but it was far from funny then, especially for our son.

And it still happens today. Even conscientious parents can lose track of their kids, leaving them behind at rest areas or becoming separated at crowded malls or entertainment venues.

From a distance of almost two millennia, it would be presumptuous for us to condemn Joseph and Mary, labeling them irresponsible parents. How could they know that Jesus, heretofore the perfect son, would stay behind in Jerusalem without letting them or anyone else "in their company" know?

What mental torture Jesus' parents must have endured. Separated for three days from their beloved son, they must have imagined the worst: Jesus victimized by a pedophile predator or perhaps kidnapped by the Romans to be sold into slavery? How relieved, to say the least, and grateful to God they must have been when "they found him."

No, Jesus' parents weren't perfect. Sinful, like every parent reading this, they lost track of Jesus, age 12, for three days. But, aside from that one demerit on their parenting record, their devotion to God, their recognition of the importance of the Passover festival as well as other Old Testament messianic prophecies, and their love of Jesus are inspiring.

Oh, blest the parents who give heed unto their children's foremost need and weary not of care or cost. May none to them and heav'n be lost! Amen. (CW 506:3)

After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. (Luke 2:46)

### JESUS PROVED TO BE PERFECT—AS STUDENT AND TEACHER

I've been on both sides of the desk in classrooms—listening to lectures but also offering instructions to confirmands and to high school and college students. My favorite teachers were those who were easy to listen to and who encouraged their students to ask questions. My favorite students were those attentive and appreciative scholars who showed their interest and eagerness to learn by posing perceptive, pertinent, challenging questions.

Everyone who was present in the temple that day was amazed at the perceptive, thought-provoking questions Jesus directed to the teachers of the law, as well as amazed at the awesome answers he gave to the questions they asked of him. Divine wisdom indeed.

I have a question in that regard, a question which possibly has crossed your mind too. Jesus is "true God from true God . . . of one being with the Father" as we confess in the Nicene Creed. Why, then, did Jesus, true God, need to ask questions of the temple teachers? Even at age 12, wouldn't Jesus, true God, be omniscient, all knowing—thus not needing to expand his already divine range of understanding?

The answer to that question is to be found in the unique person of

Jesus, in his two natures: divine and human. For the Scriptures also describe our Savior's humiliation—how he humbled himself and was obedient, even to death on the cross, in order to redeem us from sin, death, Satan, and hell.

So Jesus' asking questions in the temple courts shouldn't in any way cast doubts on his deity. In his state of humiliation, Jesus could have asked questions to grow "in wisdom" (Luke 2:52)—learning from those teachers who were believed to be the interpreters of the truth of God. Or he could have asked questions to teach those rabbis the truth that the promised Messiah had come in the unlikely person of a 12-year-old lad from Nazareth, Galilee—a hick town in the view of the sophisticated Jewish scholars.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we today could sit with Jesus, listening to him, as well as asking and answering questions? And, of course, we can.

According to his promise, Jesus is with us at all times, on call 24/7/365, whenever we worship, search the Scriptures, or spend a minute or two reading a *Meditations* page like this one. As another year winds down, how comforting it is to hear Jesus say: "I am with you always!"

**Perfect Teacher, thank you for being and teaching us the truth! Amen.**

Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you." (Luke 2:47,48)

## AMAZED, ASTONISHED, ANXIOUS: REACTIONS TO JESUS

It's understandable that everyone who was in the temple that day was amazed when the 12-year-old Jesus demonstrated divine understanding and offered awesome answers as he sat among the learned teachers.

Jesus' ability to amaze people remains powerfully intact to this day. Isn't it amazing to still hear Jesus reassure us, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life" (John 3:36)? Amazing! To receive eternal life in heaven as a free gift through God-given faith in God's Son, Jesus! Once again that amazing gospel truth has comforted us this year. And in the coming year, our amazing Savior and his Word will support and sustain us.

Mary and Joseph, who had been wondering for two days what terrible thing had happened to Jesus, were amazed to find him sitting in the temple. Why? Because they did not fully understand his mission. And so Mary thought she had to scold Jesus, as if to say, "Don't you know that you're *our* son? How could you cause us so much grief?" Jesus, however, was fully conscious that he was not only the

son of Mary but also the Son of the heavenly Father—and that he was here on earth to carry out a mission, the business the Father had put into his hands.

Jesus still astonishes and amazes us today, but not in a negative way. And there's no need for us to be anxious. Jesus—though separated from his parents for three days at age 12—today promises to be with us, not only when two or more Christians come together in his name but—according to that amazing and astonishing promise: "Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20)—at all times.

We're told that "Everyone . . . was amazed at his understanding and his answers." We Christians today are similarly amazed at Jesus' understanding of our sins and sorrows, our temptations and troubles. And it never ceases to amaze us that Jesus has all the answers we need to face the challenges and difficulties of life. In fact, Jesus *is* the answer, as he confidently asserts: "I am the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6).

**Lord Jesus, increase our faith. Show us how to live and walk with God. Amen.**

"Why were you searching for me?" he asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he was saying to them. Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. (Luke 2:49-51)

### JESUS' BUSINESS IN THE TEMPLE

In the New International Version's translation of Luke 2:49 above, Jesus asked his parents, "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" The King James Version's translation of this verse omits the "house," or temple, emphasis of the NIV in favor of what Jesus was doing in the temple: "Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?"

In his comments on this verse, Martin Luther covered both words—*house* (temple) and *business*—stating: "Wherefore the Temple was also called His [the Father's] sanctuary and sacred dwelling, since there He, through His Word, showed His presence and permitted Himself to be heard. Thus Christ is about His Father's business when He speaks to us through His Word and through it brings us to the Father" (quoted in Paul Kretzmann's *Popular Commentary of the Bible*, NT, Vol. 1, p. 277).

In this 21st-century, especially in this Christmas/New Year season, we are grateful that the Father still has houses (our churches) where Jesus is busily

about his and our Father's business. Yes, as Luther reminds us, we still have sacred dwellings, sanctuaries where God himself is present, where we hear his Word and even receive Jesus, really present in Holy Communion, and forgiveness of sins as we partake, in, with and under consecrated bread and wine, of his true body and blood.

May the new year be a time, whenever the opportunity for worship is offered us, to be in the Father's house, and at all times may A.D. 2005 afford us daily opportunities to be about our Father's business! Searching the Scriptures, growing in grace and in the knowledge of Jesus our Savior, and eagerly sharing our Christian faith will be top priorities and God-pleasing, Holy Spirit-empowered New Year's resolutions for 2005!

In the new year, may Jesus' example of perfect obedience to his parents motivate us to be eagerly obedient to the gracious good will of our heavenly Father! And may we, like Mary, always treasure these precious truths about Jesus in our hearts!

Oh, help us to forsake all sin,  
A new and holier life begin!  
Forgive the old year's sins, and bless  
The new year with true happiness. Amen. (CW 71:4)

And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.  
(Luke 2:52)

### LET'S GROW IN THE NEW YEAR AS JESUS GREW

Luke—summarizing the 18 years between Jesus' Passover trip to Jerusalem at age 12 and the beginning of his public ministry at age 30, when he was baptized by John at the Jordan River and anointed as the Messiah/Christ by the Holy Spirit—described that period of Jesus' life as a time of growth.

Since Jesus was true man as well as true God, we can readily accept Jesus growing in stature—from baby to child to teenager to young adult (plying the carpenter's trade like Joseph?)—in preparation for his three-year public ministry prior to the crucifixion climax —“It is finished!”—on Calvary.

Jesus' growing in wisdom is somewhat more difficult to comprehend. As the baby Jesus in Bethlehem was already true God, why would he need to grow in wisdom? Wasn't he from conception and his virgin birth perfectly brilliant and omniscient (all-knowing)? Wasn't his “child prodigy” performance among the temple's teachers proof that he had already attained the pinnacle of knowledge and did not need to grow in wisdom?

But Luke's writing that “Jesus grew in wisdom” reminds us that our Savior humbled himself for us. He set aside, at times, the full exer-

cise and exhibition of his deity because he was also a true man—whose human nature, like ours, was open to growth in wisdom.

How did Jesus grow in favor with God and men? Jesus' many miracles as well as his powerful preaching and parable teaching attracted multitudes of followers, though many of those followers were later conspicuously absent when he was arrested and crucified.

Jesus' favor with God the Father, however, never faltered. From the time of his baptism/anointing, when “a voice came from heaven [declaring]: ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased’” (Luke 3:22), right through his sacrificial suffering and dying for our sins, Jesus' favor with his/our Father remained firm and flawless.

There's still plenty of room for us to grow in wisdom and in favor with God and men. We can confidently entrust our growing in physical stature to our gracious God. The Lord also will make us wiser—especially regarding the way to salvation and heaven—in proportion to our eager searching and diligent study of the Scriptures.

In this new year, may the Lord enable us to grow—in wisdom as well as in favor with God and men.

**Lord Jesus, make us wise in your Word and effective witnesses to your glory! Amen.**

His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied: "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel." (Luke 1:67,68)

### ANOTHER YEAR TO PRAISE HIM

Another year stretches before us. What will it bring? How many of its days will we see? The answers reside in the Lord's capable hands. But how we use the days rests in our hands. Can we do any better than to follow Zechariah's example and fill each day with praise to the Lord?

Zechariah had been unable to speak ever since the angel of the Lord had appeared to him in the temple. The angel had come from heaven with good news. Not only would Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, have a son, but their son would prepare the way for the coming Savior.

This double good news was just too awesome to be true. So Zechariah, in doubt, had asked for a sign. Rendered speechless from that moment, he spent the months of his wife's pregnancy in silence.

Now with his son, John, in the cradle and with God's Son, Jesus, in the womb of the virgin Mary, Zechariah's tongue was unloosed. And the first words from his mouth? They were "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel." Filled with the Holy Spirit, Zechariah

sang a joyous hymn of praise to the Lord.

There are many ways to use the days of this new year. Making a living and paying the bills is surely one way. Enjoying our families and cherishing our loved ones is another. Finding leisure time for ourselves and with friends is important too. Who can find anything wrong with such actions?

But let's not forget Zechariah's example. First and foremost we want to use each day to praise the one who so fully deserves it, the Lord, our God.

Only those "filled with the Holy Spirit" know how to praise the Lord. In a most unique way, the Holy Spirit filled Zechariah's heart and mouth that day with fitting words of praise. That same Holy Spirit guides believers today in the praise they bring. When he floods the human heart with God's awesome love in Jesus, praise will be the result.

What to do with each day of this new year? First, turn to the Word through which the Holy Spirit fills the heart. Then, turn to the Lord, our God, with words and works of praise.

**Holy Spirit, through your Word fill our hearts with God's saving love, so that we may fill our days with thankful praise to him. Amen.**



Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people. . . . (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago). (Luke 1:68,70)

### PRAISE HIM FOR KEEPING HIS PROMISES

"But you promised!" What sad words. Sometimes people make promises—without any intention of keeping them. As a result they hurt others and, if done too often, destroy their own credibility. Sometimes people make promises—fully intending to keep them—but something happens to make that impossible.

Not with the Lord. What he promises, he delivers. So Zechariah, by God's grace, had learned. Zechariah's son, John, was in his arms—and the long-promised Savior was only six short months away. With eyes of faith the aged priest viewed the Savior as already being there.

He saw the seed of the woman—promised to Adam and Eve after their sin had slammed shut Eden's door. He saw the greater prophet—to whom Moses said they should listen. He saw the virgin's Son—who would be Immanuel, "God with us," as prophesied by Isaiah. He saw the Good Shepherd—who would lead to the house of the Lord forever, as David had so winsomely sung. He saw the Branch—whom Jeremiah saw springing up from the root of Jesse.

Yes, the centuries of waiting were over. The Savior was there. No wonder Zechariah praised

the Lord who always keeps his promises.

Sometimes we take God's faithfulness for granted. We hear of his forgiveness for sins because of Christ's atoning work—and barely get excited. We receive his body and blood in the Lord's Supper as assurance of sin's full forgiveness—and praise him only momentarily. And we miss out on the assurance of it all.

We have a Lord who always delivers. When he promised the Savior, he sent him. When he says he will forgive our sins each day this new year, we can take him at his Word. When he offers assurances about the other areas of life, those too will hold true.

He who keeps us will never slumber or sleep—regardless of how long our days and how dark our nights. He who loves us will make everything turn out for our good—regardless of how much we hurt at the moment. He who has numbered our days will walk us through them—even if they might not reach to the end of this new year.

Excitement, joy, and confidence are the right descriptions of those who know God. And praise to the Lord who always keeps his promises is the right reaction.

**Lord, teach us to trust your promises, so that we may praise you ever. Amen.**

Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people. And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him. (Luke 1:68,76)

### PRAISE HIM FOR COMING TO REDEEM HIS PEOPLE

How amazing that God should come into our little world, to this planet where people rebel against him. But he did! And because he did, his people have good reason to praise him just as Zechariah did.

Jesus had not yet been born. But Zechariah, moved by the Spirit, saw the Savior's coming as fact. Even more—he saw the *miracle* behind God's coming. He called the Christ Child the "Lord, the God of Israel." He described his son, John, as being "a prophet of the Most High" and John's mission as "go[ing] on before the Lord to prepare the way for him."

This past Christmas we also have beheld in the Bethlehem manger the one who is "God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God." How the Almighty could become a little baby, how the Eternal could have a birthday, how the Ruler of all could be rocked in a human mother's arms boggles our minds. But our hearts praise him for this glorious fact.

Especially do we praise the Lord when we stop to examine the reason behind his coming. Why

should he come to redeem those who had rebelled against him? Why should he take on their sins, suffer their punishment, face their hell? What but a love that is unmatched could cause him to do the impossible, to come down from the unreachable that we sinners might live forever with him in his heaven?

The Lord still comes to his people. Through the gospel in Word and sacrament he enters our hearts and fills them with his saving love. One day, either the last day of this world or our last day on it, he will come again. And the same marvelous love will be there again for his people. While others face the sentence to eternal damnation, we shall hear him say, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you" (Matthew 25:34).

Heaven will be filled with the praises of the redeemed for their loving Lord. But why wait for heaven? Each day of this new year is an opportunity to praise him with our lips and lives.

**Lord, receive our praise for your coming to earth to save us. Amen.**

To give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God. (Luke 1:77,78)

### PRAISE HIM FOR PREPARING FREE FORGIVENESS

How much of Christmas would be left—if there were no gifts? if stores offered only their usual wares? if family members put no wrapped packages under the tree? No gifts at Christmas would mean no joy for most people.

Now turn it around. Can you imagine the joy if Christians everywhere—not only each Christmas but each day of life—would reevaluate the gifts the Savior brings?

Zechariah praised the Lord for just such gifts. "Forgiveness of their sins," he called it. The word *forgiveness* means "to send away." Jesus came not just to cover over but to blot out our sins. He came not just to push our sins off into some back closet where they would not be seen but to remove them completely. When the Savior on Calvary's cross said, "It is finished," he meant it. (Picture heaven with a computer containing a file on each one of us. Picture the Savior hitting the delete key—totally wiping out our sins.) What a gift from the Lord for us—a gift worthy of our thanks and praise.

Zechariah added, "Forgiveness of their sins, *because of the tender mercy of our God.*" Here's further

reason for praising the Lord. He prepared forgiveness for those who didn't deserve it. He readied full pardon for enemies who had no love for him. "Christ died for the ungodly," Paul reminds us, emphasizing, "while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:6,8).

We know what our reaction would be to such people. But our Lord! He acts in tender mercy, boundless love, unmerited grace. He sends the dearest treasure he has to prepare the ultimate gift of forgiveness for undeserving, ill-deserving, hell-deserving sinners like us.

So what have we done with the gifts we received from others this Christmas? Some are more practical and last longer than others. Some we exchange or pack away in the closet. Regardless of what they were, it's safe to say that we could live without them. But not without God's Christmas gift. We need his forgiveness every day. We cannot live without it. And we surely would not want to die without it. As we use this treasure each day of another year, let's join Zechariah in praising the Lord whose tender heart has prepared it for us.

Thank you, Lord, for the salvation you have prepared through your Son's work. Help us daily to appreciate it and to praise you for it. Amen.

He has raised up a horn of salvation . . . to rescue us from the hand of our enemies. (Luke 1:69,74)

## PRAISE HIM FOR RESCUING US FROM OUR ENEMIES

Only once did I see a bullfight. On a supervisory trip to our missions in Mexico, one afternoon I went to the arena. It didn't take me long to figure out why the matadors used every trick they could to avoid the horns of the bulls they were taunting. Those horns packed power.

Just as this mighty animal tosses aside its enemies with its horns, so the "horn of salvation"—the mighty Savior Jesus Christ—has tossed aside sin, death, and the devil.

"The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin," 1 John 1:7 reassures us. Christ came to cut out sin's cancer and cancel its power. Though our sins may still stand in the corner, pawing the dust like some enraged bull, they can't hurt us. Though sin's horns may at times catch us because we grow careless or move too slowly, Jesus' blood still covers our sin. Our Champion has won the day. Christ has rescued us from sin.

"Our Savior, Christ Jesus . . . has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel," 2 Timothy 1:10 reassures us. When Christ paid for sin, he also removed the sting of death.

Death, like some hornet, still buzzes around us but has no venom to inject into our veins. Like some angry bull, death still rushes wildly at us, but its horns have been cut off. Our Champion has won the day. Christ has rescued us from death.

"The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work," 1 John 3:8 reassures us. No longer can Satan—like the bull with the matador in the arena—chase us around the ring in life. Christ has reduced Satan to a cardboard figure. Though the devil still looks and is real, he has no power when we use the Word as the sword of the Spirit against him. When Satan does manage to succeed against us, it's because we have not used Christ's power as we might. Our Champion has won the day. Christ has rescued us from the devil.

Perhaps you've never seen a bullfight or have never thought about animal horns. But you surely don't want to forget the "horn of [your] salvation," the powerful Savior who has rescued all of us from our fiercest enemies. So let's take time to praise him each day of this new year.

Lord, thank you for rescuing us from sin, death, and the devil. Amen.

The rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace. (Luke 1:78,79)

## PRAISE HIM FOR GUIDING US INTO THE PATH OF PEACE

Ever been in absolute darkness, where there wasn't even a hint of light? A driver, squinting in rain's darkness in the dead of night, feels uneasy as he seeks to follow the road's markings. A person coming out of surgery's anesthesia knows something about darkness and the dread it brings. But that's nothing compared to what the heart that doesn't know about forgiveness for its sins feels.

No wonder Scripture calls unbelief "darkness" and hell "utter darkness." No light, no hope, no joy, no heaven without "the rising sun" we know as Jesus.

But what peace for those whom the Spirit has brought to faith in Christ Jesus! Those stumbling around in sin's darkness have no idea how marvelous this peace is. We do! The "path of peace" of which Zechariah spoke is one the believer walks each day.

God's child wakes up each morning with the assurance that God loves him or her. God's child walks forward into each day with the confidence that God will send his angels to watch over him or

her. God's child faces the challenges of life, not unruffled and unshaken but with the calm conviction that God will turn problems into profit. God's child can even look ahead to the end of life, again not without apprehension but unafraid because he or she knows there is a room waiting for him or her in the Father's house.

There's only one reason why we as believers can walk this path of peace. "The rising sun . . . from heaven," our Savior Jesus Christ, has put an end to sin's darkness and death's shadow. More often than not we tend to take for granted the marvelous peace we have in Jesus. At these moments it's time for us to go back to square one. To ask ourselves questions like "Am I a sinner? How much (not how little) have I sinned? What do I deserve because of my sins? Where do I deserve to go because of my sins? What would death be like without Jesus?"

The more we realize how much we need God's peace, the more we'll treasure it. And the more we'll use each day of another year to praise our gracious God for it.

**Lord, help us live each day with the assurance that Jesus is our Prince of peace. Help us use each day to praise you for bringing salvation to us. Amen.**

To enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. (Luke 1:74,75)

## PRAISE HIM FOR ENABLING US TO SERVE HIM

Sometimes we make the word *praise* too small. We limit it, often without thinking, to singing hymns and an "alleluia" or two in worship services. In his hymn of praise, Zechariah reminds us that *the whole Christian life* is one of praise. The Savior came, he reminds us, "to enable us to serve him . . . all our days."

Note first of all that word *enable*. God enables us to serve him. As believers we serve the Lord—not because we are forced to but because we want to. Like some lightbulbs plugged into an electrical circuit, we shine with Christ's light. Unlike those lightbulbs, however, for us there is no on/off switch so that we shine only once in a while. When God in his grace plugs us into the Savior, ongoing service is the result.

Note also the words "in holiness and righteousness before him." God's children know God's will and seek to follow it. We want to please our loving Father. We want to do what he wants. We want to deal with our fellow man the way our Father does with us.

How can we show love for God if we don't show it for those he has placed near us? How can

people around us even get a taste of what our God is like if we don't model him for them?

Serving our Savior-God in righteousness and holiness is not only a way of praising him. It is also a way of preaching to those around us. To tell others about the Savior-God in any way is to praise him.

Note also the words *without fear*. The Christian life is not some smooth freeway with frequent rest stops. When we seek to serve the Lord in daily life, we soon find out how tough such travel can be. When we work at being Christian husbands and wives, parents and children, employees and employers, teachers and students, church members and church workers, we quickly discover our ongoing need for God's enabling power.

Martin Luther is quoted as saying, "We are to believe and live and love and work as though Jesus Christ died yesterday, rose today, and is coming again tomorrow." Perhaps he had in mind Zechariah's words about serving our Savior without fear in holiness and righteousness all our days. That's what praise is all about.

Lord, fill us with your salvation so that we respond with praise to you all our days. Amen.

When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took [Jesus] to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord. (Luke 2:22)

### FAITH LIVES IN THE DETAILS

The headlines on the front page of the newspaper trumpet the important news of the day for us. We like our news in easy-to-read slogans outlined in big black letters—the bigger the better. In our busy lives we only have time for the headlines, for the really important events of life—but not for the details.

And don't we often find ourselves doing the same sort of thing when we read the Bible? We turn right to the headlines: the miracle of our Savior's birth, the sacrifice of his life upon the cross, the victory over death on Easter morning—and rightly so! For these headlines tell of a Savior who profoundly changed our world with his righteousness and holy blood.

But let's not forget the little details of our Savior's life: the way he welcomed little children into his arms, the visit he made to the house of a sinner named Zacchaeus—these too are precious. In these little details we also discover the richness and depth of our Savior's love.

What Mary and Joseph did in bringing Jesus to the temple when

he was 40 days old might seem to belong to the little details category. Yet we see that these faithful servants of God—whose lives were turned upside down by this little addition called the Messiah—were, indeed, rightly concerned about such little details.

Quietly and faithfully they obeyed God's law and brought Jesus to the temple to be presented to the Lord. Jesus, as God's own Son and our Savior, was consecrated to the Lord in the fullest possible way. Here Mary and Joseph were more than just good Jewish parents. They were faithful servants whose love for God shone brightly in the quiet details of their lives.

In the biggest, boldest headlines of God's Word, his salvation is proclaimed most clearly in the message of the cross and empty tomb. But don't forget to ponder the little details where Christ's love for us also shines through and the little details of our lives—those quiet moments when no one is looking, when we can serve our Savior and our fellow people in love.

Heavenly Father, in perfect love you sent your Son to be our Savior from sin and death. In amazing actions and in the little details, our Savior displayed the depth of his love for us. Help us to respond to your love with lives dedicated to serving you. Amen.

Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel. (Luke 2:25)

### THE JOY OF WAITING

"If the 1980s were about quality and the 1990s were about reengineering, then the 2000s will be about velocity." That's Microsoft chairman Bill Gates talking about the future of business in his book *Business @ the Speed of Thought*. According to Gates, the companies that will be successful in the next decade are the ones that will be able to communicate quickly and to make changes in the blink of an eye.

And it's not just business that has speeded up but our everyday lives as well. Thanks to technology, hours have been shaved off our daily schedules. Rather than going to the mall to shop or standing in line at the bank, we can save hours by simply doing these things online—without leaving home. Even putting gas in the car becomes faster as we wave our speed passes at the pumps or zap in our credit cards. Welcome to life at the speed of thought.

I wonder—how would Simeon do in our 21st-century world of speed? To a faithful child of God like Simeon, *waiting* not *velocity* was the catchword. And he waited patiently for something special—for God to bring his comfort

to Israel through the promise of his Son.

From God's prophecies Simeon knew this child would bring the perfect peace of forgiveness to a chaotic, sinful world. And by special insight given to him by the Holy Spirit, Simeon knew that he would actually see this fulfilled in Jesus with his own eyes. To Simeon, waiting meant being one day closer to seeing God's love fulfilled, to seeing the miracle of God become flesh.

In our ever fast and faster world, we patiently wait—wait for our Savior to return to take us to our heavenly home. And as we wait, we have precious moments—moments to reflect on the miracle of God's love for sinners like us. Moments to ponder God's promises that come to us so vividly in his Word and sacraments. Moments to reflect on the mission our God has given us and then to embrace that mission with hearts and hands of faith.

In the midst of a fast-food, accelerated world, take a moment to find true comfort in the joy of waiting. The best is yet to come—the day when we will stand in the presence of our Savior. That's something to look forward to—something worth waiting for.

Dear Savior, help us to do your work while we wait. Amen.



Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." (Luke 2:28-32)

## HOLDING A PROMISE IN YOUR HANDS

If only. If only we could find Noah's ark or the ark of the covenant—then people would have to believe! If only. How often has a thought like that crossed your mind as you watched yet another neighbor or friend walk away from the gospel with an unbelieving heart? Perhaps more times than some of us would care to admit.

Yet forget about the artifacts. Forget about archaeological discoveries. That's not how the Holy Spirit works. Rather, he grabs hold of our dead, lifeless hearts and brings them to life through the power of the gospel. He enables us to see the love of God in all its power and magnificence in the lowly picture of a cross.

Imagine, for just a moment, what it was like to be Simeon. Simeon believed God without any signs, without any miracles. Yet God, in his love for his servant, gave Simeon the chance to embrace the King of kings, to hug the Savior of the world, to hold in his arms the fulfillment of God's

promise. With Simeon's own eyes he saw God's salvation in the flesh—salvation not just for the chosen people of Israel but for the Gentiles as well. Simeon had waited for this day his entire life—and God didn't disappoint his faithful servant.

Now more than ever we need to embrace and hold fast to our Savior. In a society that lives by the "feel good" philosophy of Oprah Winfrey, we hold to the rock-solid truths of God's plan of salvation. In a culture enamored of reality-based television, we hold fast to *the* certain reality—the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the forgiveness that is ours in his name. In a world deeply concerned about security and safety, we build our hope and our lives on the rock of our salvation.

Hold God's promise tightly in your heart. See with the clear eyes of faith your salvation in Jesus Christ. And help others to hold on to him too.

Dear Lord, in a world full of confusion and hurt, help us to embrace our Savior with hearts of faith. Give us opportunities to share with others the sure and certain hope of our living Savior. Amen.

The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. (Luke 2:33)

### ANYTHING BUT ORDINARY

Prepare to be dazzled! Prepare to have your socks knocked off! Prepare to have your senses pushed to the edge! So the advertising copy for some upcoming movies would have us react to film's latest offerings.

It's interesting to note how Mary and Joseph reacted to what Simeon had to say about their son. After all—you'd think that by now they'd have been used to hearing miraculous things said about Jesus. Think of their previous experiences—angels dropping in for a visit, God communicating to them in dreams. One would think that one more bit of news about Jesus wouldn't have surprised them.

But Mary and Joseph *did* marvel at the words of Simeon. They marveled that this bundle of joy was the key to God's *worldwide* plan of salvation—that their child would transcend all cultural and tribal boundaries as the light to the Gentiles as well as the glory of the nation of Israel. They marveled at how God through this little child would bring salvation to the ends of the earth.

Yet isn't it amazing how often in our day people attempt to make the miraculous sound commonplace? Born of a virgin—so what! Christ's sacrificial death on a

cross—old hat. The empty tomb—yesterday's headline. In our sinful weakness, we often itch for something new and fail to marvel at God's great good news centered in this child.

Living faith sees Jesus as anything but ordinary. Marvel that God would care for sinners like us. Gasp in amazement at the depths of God's love—that he was willing to experience the depths of hell for us. Stand in awe of his faithfulness—that took him to the cross. Continue to be spellbound by the victory of our Savior's resurrection—a victory that guarantees for us a future in heaven.

Live each day in *fresh* anticipation of our Savior's love—as Jeremiah so eloquently stated it for us: "Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness" (Lamentations 3:22,23).

Our Savior is many wonderful things. The Light of the world. The King of kings. The Word made flesh. The power and wisdom of God. The Son of God. He is anything but ordinary. And we, filled with living faith, can do nothing but continue to marvel at his love for us.

Heavenly Father, fill us with living faith that responds to the wonders of your love. Amen.

Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed." (Luke 2:34,35)

## THE DEFINING MOMENT

Where do you stand? What do you really believe in? How far are you willing to go to confess Jesus as Lord? There are defining moments in our lives as Christians—moments when we are called upon to put our faith on the line.

In the early church, many Christians were willing to stand up, even under peril of death, to confess Jesus as Lord. Centuries later, Luther, in front of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Worms, took his stand on the Word of God and its central teaching: the free gift of salvation in Jesus Christ.

In our own lives such defining moments tend to arise in less dramatic and less dangerous ways. Perhaps when a college professor challenges our belief in the existence of God. Perhaps at a party where a friend describes our beliefs in Jesus as just plain "silly."

Ultimately, no one can take a neutral attitude toward Jesus or his claims on the hearts and lives of people. That, in essence, is what Simeon is telling Mary when he says, "This child is destined to

cause the falling and rising of many in Israel." Those who receive him as their Savior are raised up out of their guilt and condemnation to become children of God. Those who reject him stumble over him and his message and fall to their own destruction. In short, the thoughts that control all hearts are revealed one way or the other. There is no riding the fence or living in lukewarmness here. Christ defines who we really are.

In our 21st-century world, Jesus is still that defining moment—the one over against whom people rise and fall. To many Jesus is simply a stumbling block. They want a "designer" Jesus to fit what they want in a Savior. Jesus as example. Jesus as teacher. Jesus as philosopher. But nothing more. Over the Savior-God they stumble and fall in unbelief.

But with eyes of faith we see Jesus for who he really is. The sacrifice for our sins. The champion over death. The provider of life everlasting. And through his perfect love he has defined for us who we really are—his own children and heirs to eternal life.

Dear Savior, in the defining moments of our lives, help us to stand up for you. Amen.

There was also a prophetess, Anna . . . She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them . . . she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem. (Luke 2:36-38)

### LIVING FAITH RESPONDS

"What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?" asks the apostle James (2:14). A few verses later he answers his own question: "In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead" (2:17).

In clear words James defines for us what faith is and what it's not. It's first and foremost trust in Jesus as our Savior. It's not mere knowledge of the facts about Jesus and his life. It does not hide itself underneath a rock. It shines out; it displays itself vividly in our actions.

Witness genuine faith as it expressed itself in the life of the prophetess Anna. Her life had been touched by the grace of God. A glowing faith burned in her heart. It had made her a woman of prayer and devotion and led her to dedicate her entire life to the service of the Lord. Day in and out she worshiped him. God used her as his instrument to bring his Word to people. And

when she saw the Christ Child, she added her thanksgiving to that of Simeon.

Anna's faith was not just some bag of intellectual facts that expressed itself in cold, external rituals, as was often the case with the Pharisees. No, her faith in the promised Savior led her to pray, praise, and thank God from the bottom of her heart. And it led her to speak out about what this Savior meant to her—to all who were willing to listen.

Here, then, are two faith-filled and faithful people, Anna and Simeon, near the end of their lives—still serving God, still moving full steam ahead.

Yes, living faith responds. Knowing Christ, knowing the power of his love and the miracle of his salvation, we are compelled to live our lives in service to our Lord. In living faith we give thanks to God for our salvation and the countless other blessings we have received. In living faith we respond to his love for us by sharing his love with others.

**Dear heavenly Father, in loving response to your love, help us to live our lives in thanksgiving to you. Amen.**

When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him. (Luke 2:39,40)

### THE CHILD PRODIGY

One can't help but think that Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was a unique child—one who was loved by God in a special way. Almost from the very beginning of his life he showed talent. At three years old he read music. At six he could play the clavier, the violin, and the organ. At nine he completed his first symphony. Child prodigy, creative genius—Wolfgang Amadeus (“loved by God”) Mozart eventually went on to be considered the greatest composer of all time.

We know of another child who was loved by God. A child who grew in size and physical strength like any ordinary child. A child who grew in wisdom and understanding. A child who was filled with God's grace. In many ways, just a normal child growing up.

It's true that Jesus experienced human growth and development—mentally and spiritually. Yet Scripture also makes it plain that Jesus possessed a spiritual knowledge, understanding, and wisdom far beyond that of any other man—even a sinless one. And this is especially true of the

realization that he is the Son of the Father in heaven.

Jesus had to be like us so that he could complete his Father's plan of salvation. He had to be human in every way to be under God's law and to be our substitute. If Jesus were to really take our place upon the cross, if he were really to be our sacrifice for our sins, he had to be human—just like us. And yet as true God, this child could do what no human child could do—shed his holy blood and pay the price for the sins of every person of the world.

I wonder what it would have been like to know Jesus as a little child, to watch him play with other children, to watch him help his earthly father with his carpentry. Jesus never wrote a symphony or performed before the royal houses of Europe. He never made the rounds as a famous musician and composer. He simply became our Savior, a living and breathing promise in the flesh, the Lamb of God that would lay down his perfect life for our sins. Our Savior—truly loved by God and loved by us.

**Heavenly Father, thank you for giving us your holy and perfect Son to be our life-giving Savior. Amen.**

On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. (John 2:1,2)

### A MARRIAGE IS HONORED BY JESUS' PRESENCE

"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). The one who penned those words was present when Jesus revealed his glory for the first time. It was at a wedding at Cana in Galilee.

Weddings are festive occasions, and there were some very special guests at this wedding. Mary, Jesus' mother, was there. She was more than a guest—perhaps the hostess of the festivities. Jesus was also there. And so were the six disciples he had chosen so far. With his presence and through his participation in the joys of this wedding, Jesus dignified and honored marriage and put his stamp of approval upon everyday family life.

Jesus, you see, had come to sanctify all of human life, times of joy as well as times of sadness. His ministry was not that of a wilderness prophet but that of the Son of God, the Savior of the world, who mingled with people and blessed them with his love as they lived out their day-to-day lives.

It was not by chance that Jesus chose a wedding to first reveal his

glory. It was entirely fitting that the Son of God should be present at the occasion that symbolized the union of God with Israel and the Son of God (the groom) with his bride (the church).

God had ordained marriage when, at creation, he brought Eve to Adam, one man and one woman. They were to live together in harmony, peace, and love. They were to have children and bring up those children to know the God of grace and love and mercy.

Those of us who have been blessed by God and made new creatures through faith in Jesus desire Jesus' presence at our weddings and in our daily family lives. We know that he takes an interest in our homes, that he is concerned not only about the major spiritual issues that touch our lives but the everyday "minor" family issues as well. And so we build our homes and our marriages with the spiritual stones of faith, love, and integrity—knowing that the spiritual vitality for any and all success is the presence of Christ. And we look to him to bless us with harmony, peace, faithfulness, and lifelong love.

**Dear Jesus, bless our marriages and our families. Amen.**

When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine." (John 2:3)

### AN OPPORTUNITY TO SHOW HIS GLORY

Horror of horrors! More guests than expected had appeared at this wedding feast, and the wine was soon almost gone! Among us that would probably not be a big deal. But in the East, where hospitality is regarded as sacred, for a host to run out of wine before the wedding celebration was over would have been regarded as well nigh criminal. Something had to be done and done quickly.

Mary saw the need for extraordinary help, so she went to Jesus. She knew her Son was the promised Messiah. She remembered the words of the angel who announced his birth. She had pondered Simeon's descriptive expressions: "light . . . to the Gentiles" and the "glory to . . . Israel" (Luke 2:32). She recalled the words Jesus himself had spoken to her when he was 12 years old.

And she knew of the important events that had taken place recently—God's stamp of approval and the anointing with the Spirit and power at Jesus' baptism, the beginning of his public ministry. Did she understand that Jesus' time had come? Was she waiting

for him to reveal his glory, to let the world know who he was? It would seem so.

And so she came to Jesus. "They have no more wine." It was a simple statement of fact, but behind it lay the implication that here was a golden opportunity for Jesus to reveal his glory and in some wonderful way save the couple from public humiliation. Implied though it was, Mary did not impose her "when" or "how" on him. She only stated the problem.

Our weddings, marriages, and family lives are not without troubles and problems. So many things happen that cause embarrassment, shame, and even disaster. All too often we try to "fix" things ourselves and in our own way.

Learn from Mary. When troubles come, go to Jesus. He's there. He is the Lord, the King of glory. Simply take the situation to Jesus, believing that he will bless us and reveal his glory. Everything that touches us is of interest to him. By God's grace we know him as our loving Savior who will never leave us or forsake us.

Dear Jesus, our marriages and family lives are often filled with strife and trouble. Forgive the hostile words we speak, our selfishness, and our unfaithfulness. Give us your blessings that we may forgive others and live in peace. We lay our problems before you and trust that you will deal with us according to your grace and mercy. Amen.

"Dear woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied, "My time has not yet come." (John 2:4)

### HIS GLORY WAS REVEALED IN HIS TIME AND WAY

How could Jesus be so cruel and hard hearted? At least it sounds that way to our ears. However, the word "woman" was not a harsh expression in Jesus' time and culture. Jesus used the same word during his crucifixion. Even as he was laying down his life for the sins of the world, he lovingly provided for the continued care of his mother by saying to John, "Woman, here is your son" (John 19:26).

And then there were those little words "not yet." The faith of Mary caught the promise hidden in those little words. She understood them to mean that his time would soon come and that he would do something about the wineless wedding. And she believed that what would be done would be done in his and the Father's divinely appointed time—not her time.

Even Jesus' own mother had to leave matters, particularly those pertaining to his work as the Savior and Redeemer of the world, in his hands and in the hands of his heavenly Father. She had to learn that their relationship too had changed—that from now on the emphasis was not on Jesus the son

of Mary but on Christ the Son of God. And thus she could not force his hand and attempt to get him to act before his time had come.

"I want it fixed, and I want it fixed right now." We Americans are generally not a patient people. A shot of something here, a pill there, an operation now—these things immediately fix what's wrong.

But it doesn't always work that way. We are in the hands of our dear Savior. He uses many things to fix our troubles and problems. It often takes time to straighten out what we have made crooked in our marriages and family lives.

We want it fixed now. But Jesus, ever present with us, deals with us as he knows best—in his own time and in his own way. He addresses us with terms of endearment: "my brother" and "my sister."

"Not yet," he says. But together with Mary we know and believe those words certainly imply that the time *will* come, that in his own time and in his own way he will graciously and lovingly deal with us and with our problems. Then we shall see his glory and praise his holy name.

Dear Jesus, help us, and let your glory shine on us in your own time and in your own way. Amen.



His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." (John 2:5)

## CONTINUING TRUST THAT HE WILL SHOW HIS GLORY

When Mary came to Jesus with her request, she didn't get the answer she expected. But to her credit she sensed that a new relationship was evolving. Yes, she was Jesus' mother. But Jesus was also her Lord. And as God's Son he must be guided solely by the will of the heavenly Father and the mission of saving the world that had been entrusted to him.

Yet Mary did not abandon the hope that Jesus would act and somehow provide wine for the feast. The wedding couple were his friends. The groom, as the host of the wedding feast, was on the verge of public humiliation and embarrassment. Mary believed that Jesus, always sensitive to the feelings and needs of people, would step in and help and somehow save the day.

Mary was so confident Jesus would act that she directed the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Notice where the emphasis in those words lies. Not on what *I* tell you to do but on what *he* tells you. Mary leaves the solution entirely up to Jesus' wisdom. At the same time she enjoins upon the servants complete submission to the will of him who was her

son—but also her master. In her own humble, implicit faith she prepared the servants so they'd be ready to obey any command—strange as it might seem—that Jesus might address to them.

Mary gave sound and sage advice to the servants, advice we would do well to heed. We have our way of dealing with things. The world, for example, has all sorts of answers to our marriage trials and problems. The quick fix is divorce. The solution is to dictate and threaten. Pleasure can be found in someone else. This is our way, the world's way—but this is not Jesus' way.

We learn his way from his Word. Surrounded and influenced by the ways of the world, we can't help but question his way. For his way involves "being made a new creature." His way is a way of selfless love, patience, kindness, forgiveness, meekness, and in honor respecting others more than self. These are the ways of his glory and the ways of his life. Search out those ways in his Word. Trust him and his ways.

We hear you, Mary. And believing as you did, we will follow your direction: "Do whatever he tells you."

**Dear Lord, lead us in your ways, not our ways. Amen.**

Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water"; so they filled them to the brim. (John 2:6,7)

### STRANGE PATHS TO GLORY

Jesus' hour had come. And what a strange path he took to reveal his glory.

There were six large water pots of stone nearby, each one holding from 20 to 30 gallons. Such a large amount of water was provided so that the guests could wash their hands and feet and perform the other ceremonial washings required by the law.

To fill six large vessels with water required a great deal of work. There was no running water in these homes. Water had to be carried from wells or cisterns, which were usually outside the village. So the servants might have balked when Jesus told them, "Fill the jars with water." But Mary had prepared them well. And so, without question and without complaint, they did as they were told and "filled them to the brim."

Jesus took many strange paths to glory. The strangest of all, of course, was letting his detractors and enemies take him prisoner, beat, mock, abuse him, and finally lead him away to be crucified.

His strange ways are not our ways. We would think that

the path to glory would be to wipe out and destroy the enemies—not die for them. But thank God his ways are not our ways. Thank God that Jesus' path to glory was the path of sacrifice. Jesus, the Son of God, took on himself the sins of the world as "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Lots of questions might be raised as to why God determined this way to glory. Our self-importance and self-righteousness would much rather believe that we don't need a Savior from sin and that we can find our own way to glory. It's so very difficult for us to put aside our ways and to follow Jesus.

But Jesus has told us that "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent" (John 6:29). If we want abundant life now and eternal life with God in heaven, then we need to lay aside our pitiful attempts to get rid of sin and to get ourselves right with God and trust in Jesus and in his strange way to glory. Listen to him, and believe in him and his sacrifice.

**Dear Lord, lead us to appreciate what Jesus has done for us. Amen.**

Then he told them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet." They did so, and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. . . . He called the bridegroom aside and said, "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now." (John 2:8-10)

## JESUS' GLORY REVEALED

If Jesus' direction to "fill the jars with water" was a strange one, his next direction was even stranger. But again the servants did as they were told. They drew some of the "water" out in smaller vessels and took the vessels to the "master of the banquet."

When he put the drinking cup to his lips and tasted it, the banquet master discovered that it was not water but wine—wine much better than any that had been served previously. He even wisecracked that in holding back the good wine the bridegroom had fouled up the sensible custom usually followed at banquets.

Jesus' miracle was immediate. He used regular water. And from that water, with only a word from him, he created wine. The wine he created was very good, delicious—and was much more than was needed for the feast, an ongoing gift from Jesus to the bridegroom and his bride. Every good and perfect gift comes from the hand of God. And in these gifts the signs of Jesus' divine power and glory can be seen by eyes of faith.

We do see his miracles, the glory of Jesus, every day. Perhaps because they're not so immediate or sensational, we often don't think of them as miracles. But everything we need—our unfailing supply of food, clothing, and shelter, heat and cooling—comes from the hand of our gracious Lord.

And they're all miraculous gifts of God—not mere happenings of nature, not mere common, everyday events that "just happen" of their own accord. Must we not recognize them as manifestations of our gracious and giving Lord—as revelations of Jesus' divine glory, power, and love?

Then look further, and see the greatest miracle of all. See him dying willingly as the sacrifice for all the sins of all people. Look further still, and see him conquering death and rising to life again.

Jesus lives, and this is the ultimate glory! Know that he will keep his promise to deal with our greatest problem when he comes again on the Last Day to raise us from our graves—to gather you and me and all believers into glory everlasting.

**Keep our faith strong and burning, dear Jesus. Amen.**

This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him. (John 2:11)

### HIS DISCIPLES PUT THEIR FAITH IN HIM AND LIVE

John had his reasons for writing about the miracle of the water turned into wine. It was a miraculous sign that pointed to the glory of the one who had performed it—a visible emblem of who he was and of what he came to do.

And it occurred at an important moment in the revelation of the Lord and the faith of the disciples. The thirty-odd years of obscurity in Nazareth had come to an end, and the Savior's public ministry was in its infancy. At this point it was a clear signpost pointing to the fact that he was the Messiah, the Son of God. It was the first of the many that would give visible proof of Jesus' power and glory.

The glory of Jesus, in its very nature, was usually concealed from the people. Only on rare occasions (such as the Transfiguration) did Jesus allow it to shine through. But miracles were the brilliant signs of the glory of Jesus. They drew attention to the full glory of his being. They confronted the people—disciples and enemies alike—with an inescapable challenge. The miracles demanded an answer to the questions: What do you think of Jesus? Who do you say he is?

In another sense we might also say that they were God's billboard to the world, announcing: "This is my Son, sent to meet your greatest need—salvation from sin and spiritual death." Or as another would put it: "They are God's thumb in the world's eye to draw their attention to his Son and his saving work."

John calls this and all Jesus' miracles "miraculous signs."

Now not too many knew what had happened. The servants knew. Mary knew. The disciples knew. And because they knew and had seen his glory, they put their faith in him. It was not that the miracle brought them to faith. As John chapter 1 shows us, they already believed. But this manifestation of his glory did serve to confirm and strengthen their faith in Jesus. And as they continued to walk with him, to listen to him, and to witness his miracles, their faith in him continued to grow.

When, by the grace and mercy and miraculous power of the Holy Spirit, we behold the miraculous signs recorded in the Scriptures, we who were dead people walking are made alive and new in Christ.

**Thank you, Lord, for allowing us to see your glory. Amen.**

Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. (Luke 4:14)

### IN THE POWER OF THE SPIRIT

In Acts 10:37,38 Peter describes Jesus' ministry with these words, "You know . . . how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him." Jesus carried out his ministry as the Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed of the Lord.

When Old Testament prophets, priests, and kings began their ministries, they were anointed with oil as a promise and a symbol that the Holy Spirit with his power would be with them as they served. Jesus was not anointed with oil. He was anointed with the Holy Spirit himself.

This anointing took place at Jesus' baptism when the Holy Spirit descended on him like a dove. In so far as he is true God, Jesus needed no anointing of the Spirit. Everything that belongs to the Spirit already belongs to the only begotten Son of God. In the eternal relationships within the Trinity, the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. The Spirit is sent to the church by the Father

and the Son. But as the second Adam, as the *man* who came to take our place, Jesus was anointed by the Spirit for his ministry.

Each one of us receives certain gifts of the Spirit in a certain measure. Jesus received all the gifts of the Spirit in their fullness. Of the Messiah, Isaiah says: "The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD—and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. . . . With righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth" (11:2-4).

Jesus received the Spirit without limit (John 3:24) so that he could serve us without limit. He was fully equipped with every gift he needed to be our Savior.

We receive testimony of Jesus' qualifications to be our Savior from the Christmas angels and from his Father at the time of Jesus' baptism, at his transfiguration, at the moment of his death, and especially in his resurrection. We can have complete confidence in his work.

**Jesus, you are the Christ, the Anointed of God. You have come in the power of the Spirit. We place all our trust in what you have done for us. Amen.**

On the Sabbath day [Jesus] went into the synagogue, as was his custom. (Luke 4:16)

### IN THE POWER OF THE SPIRIT JESUS OBEYED HIS FATHER'S WILL

Jesus came to do his Father's will. At the time of his meeting with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, Jesus said, "My food . . . is to do the will of him who sent me" (John 4:34). Jesus' highest priority, his greatest need, was to do his Father's will.

Jesus' devotion to his Father's will was sustained by a life filled with prayer and worship. This was true already during his childhood. As an infant he had been circumcised and presented at the temple in obedience to the law. In Luke chapter 2 we read: "Every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. When he was twelve years old, they went up to the Feast, according to the custom" (verses 41,42). When his parents were distressed about his disappearance from their group, he asked, "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" (verse 49).

This devotion to his Father's will continued throughout his ministry. As our text says, "He went into the synagogue, as was his custom." No matter how busy he was, Jesus was never too busy for prayer. In fact, the busier he

was, the more urgent was his need and desire for prayer. Regularly, when work and the press of crowds consumed his days, he spent the night in prayer. And in his direst moments, in Gethsemane and on the cross, he prayed.

In one sense no one ever needed worship and prayer more than Jesus. He was bearing the crushing burden of the sins of the whole world. He was keeping the law perfectly for us.

In another sense no man needed worship and prayer less than Jesus—after all he was God's own Son. He was the Lord of the law. Everything in heaven and earth was his. Yet as our substitute and example, he was completely devoted to worship and prayer.

Among us the questions, Are we going to church this Sunday? Should we attend the Lenten service this week? and Should we have a devotion today? should not have to be asked. The answers should be as obvious as the answer to the question, Are we going to eat any food today? Worship should be our custom, yes, in the right sense of the word, our habit.

Lord, teach us to pray as you prayed. Lead us to make God's will our "food," the driving power of our lives. Amen.

[Jesus] taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him. . . . He stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me." (Luke 4:15-18)

## IN THE POWER OF THE SPIRIT, JESUS TAUGHT

Jesus came as a teacher sent from God. The writer to the Hebrews says, "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son" (1:1,2). As the one who came from heaven, Jesus can fully reveal the will of the Father in Heaven. In Christ we have the complete revelation of God's plans for us.

This revelation from Jesus is also given through the power of the Spirit: "For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit" (John 3:34). All of the revelations given by Old Testament prophets were incomplete. They knew certain information about the Messiah, but they did not know the whole story. They knew in a general way that their prophecies would be fulfilled by the Messiah, but they did not understand exactly how and when. Now that Jesus has appeared and unveiled God's plan, we have the whole story of salvation before us. Jesus' teaching is perfect in its content.

Jesus' teaching is also perfect in its manner. Isaiah said of Christ: "The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD" (11:2). Jesus knew how to deal with people of every sort—patiently with the weak, sternly with the hardened. He delivered the harshest warnings of the law and the most tender comfort of the gospel, exactly as the occasion called for.

The Lord foretold of him: "Here is . . . my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him . . . He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out" (Isaiah 42:1-3). Jesus fulfilled these words perfectly during his ministry in Galilee (Matthew 12:20).

Think of how Jesus welcomed sinners. Think of how patiently he bore with his disciples' weaknesses and doubts. Through his teaching we too live in the power of the Spirit.

**Lord, teach us to come to the Father through you. Amen.**

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. (Luke 4:18)

## IN THE POWER OF THE SPIRIT, JESUS PREACHED GOOD NEWS

Jesus preached the law as a warning against sin and as a rule for sanctified living, but he was preeminently a preacher of the gospel, the good news of salvation.

Jesus himself was the good news. On the night of his birth, the angel announced, "I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:10,11).

The substance of the good news is that Jesus lived, died, and rose for you, for me, for everyone. As our substitute he kept the law perfectly for us. In his death on the cross he suffered the full penalty for our sins.

Because our debt has been paid in full, God has declared that our sins are forgiven in full. He proved this to us through Jesus' resurrection. Through the Spirit of holiness, Jesus "was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead" (Romans 1:4).

The Holy Spirit led Jesus throughout all the work he did for us. The Holy Spirit now leads us to trust in what Christ has done

for us as our Savior. He does this through the means of grace, the gospel in Word and sacrament.

During his lifetime Jesus himself preached the good news throughout Israel. He established the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. He trained men to continue that preaching of good news throughout the world after he himself had returned to heaven.

That good news has been passed from generation to generation. Through his servants Christ still preaches good news today. He will do so to the end of the age.

This good news is for the poor, but not just for those poor in money and possessions. It is for the poor in spirit—that is, those who know that they have nothing they can offer God to pay for their forgiveness and salvation. Bankrupt, they come to him empty-handed. But they find that their debt has been paid by another. The price paid was the Savior's holy precious blood and innocent sufferings and death. Because he died, we will live. That is the good news for the poor.

**Jesus, you became poor so we could become rich. We celebrate the good news that we are rich through you. Amen.**



The Spirit of the Lord is on me . . . He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners. (Luke 4:18)

## IN THE POWER OF THE SPIRIT, JESUS PROCLAIMED FREEDOM

"Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Corinthians 3:17). "Through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death" (Romans 8:2). These two passages summarize the chief gift of the Spirit and the source from which the Spirit obtains that gift. The gift is freedom. The source of the gift is Christ.

Christ bought the gift of freedom for us by means of his life and death for us. "Since [we] have flesh and blood, [Christ] too shared in [our] humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death" (Hebrews 2:14,15). As we confess in the explanation of the Second Article of the Creed, we have been freed from sin, death, and the power of the devil. We have been set free by the ransom Christ paid for us.

Everyone who sins is a slave to sin. But when we have been freed from the guilt and power of sin,

we are set free to serve God. We should not return to slavery by returning again to a life of sin. To live in sin is slavery. Living in God's law is perfect freedom.

We should not enslave ourselves to the traditions of men. "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery" (Galatians 5:1). Freed from sin, we have also been freed from the doctrines of men. We live through the power of the gospel alone.

We will enter into the full measure of that freedom on the day of resurrection, when we are brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. Then we will be free from sin and from all its effects—free from tears, free from pains of body and mind.

Jesus promised, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31,32). Hold to that truth with all of your strength, all the strength the Spirit gives you.

**Make us holy in the truth. Your Word, Lord, is truth. Keep us secure in the freedom of the gospel until we enter the full freedom of heaven. Amen.**

The Spirit of the Lord is on me . . . He has sent me . . . to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Luke 4:18,19)

## IN THE POWER OF THE SPIRIT JESUS PROCLAIMED THE YEAR OF THE LORD'S FAVOR

Jesus' mission is to "proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." This phrase seems to allude to the year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25:8-55). Every 50th year the Israelites were to release all those servants who had become enslaved because of debt and poverty. Also in the Jubilee year, every Israelite family that had lost its land regained its lost inheritance. The coming of the Jubilee year certainly filled the land of Israel with happiness.

But this Jubilee year, as great a blessing as it was, was only a type and symbol of the greater spiritual jubilee that was brought in by the Messiah. In the Messiah's jubilee, slaves to sin are set free from all their debts. Poor sinners who lost their inheritance in the heavenly promised land have their inheritance restored to them.

The Israelites did not have to do anything to earn the benefits of the Jubilee year. They did not have to possess any special qualifications or merits to entitle them to the benefits of the Jubilee year. They received these blessings as a gift. The Messiah's jubilee year is called the year of the Lord's favor.

The benefits of the Jubilee year are dependent on the Lord's gracious, good will. They are blessings available to all, even to the most unworthy.

The Jubilee year was a very specific, limited time. For most Israelites the Jubilee was a once-in-a-lifetime event. Once the Jubilee year had passed, most people would never get another chance at obtaining its blessings.

The Messiah's jubilee year is both the same as and different than the Old Testament Jubilee year. It is different because it is not a once-in-a-lifetime event. The gospel is preached every year, not every 50th year.

Yet in a way, the Messiah's jubilee year is the same as the Jubilee year of the ceremonial law. It is a specified time. It has an expiration date. For each individual the expiration date is the date of death. For the world the expiration date of the Jubilee year is judgment day.

Once that date has come, the opportunity to receive the blessings of the jubilee is forever gone. Now is the day of salvation! Now is the time to enter God's rest.

Through the Spirit give us power to seize our times of grace and to proclaim the good news to others while it is still day. Amen.

The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:20,21)

## IN THE POWER OF THE SPIRIT, JESUS FULFILLED GOD'S PLAN

On the cross Jesus announced, "It is finished." On the road to Emmaus he explained to his disciples how he had fulfilled everything written in the law and the prophets and the psalms.

Jesus is called the Alpha and Omega, the A and the Z, the Beginning and the End. He fulfilled all the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament in our sight—from the first prophecy given in the Garden of Eden, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel" (Genesis 3:15), through the last prophecies of Malachi that end the Old Testament, "See, I will send you the prophet Elijah [John the Baptist] before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers" (4:5,6). All of the prophecies of this first coming have been fulfilled.

What Old Testament kings and prophets longed to see, we have seen. The death and resurrection

of Jesus, which John the Baptist saw only in faith, we have seen accomplished. Statements which puzzled the Old Testament sages—how can the Messiah be "assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death" (Isaiah 53:9)?—today are very clear even to a Sunday school child: Jesus was executed with criminals but buried in a rich man's tomb.

Our text says the eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on Jesus. They were amazed at what he had done. They could not wait to hear what he would say next.

Our eyes too should be fastened on Jesus. Look carefully at everything he has done, from his birth in Bethlehem to his ascension from the Mount of Olives.

Keep your eyes fixed on him as you travel through life. Look to him for forgiveness, pardon, and peace. Look to him for comfort in sorrow and for help in trial. Turn your eyes heavenward as you wait for his return. Keep your eyes on Jesus.

Jesus, you came in the power of the Spirit to lead us in the way of the Spirit. Give us power to cling to the blessings the Spirit brings and to give them freely to others through your Word. Amen.

The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:20,21)

### A WORD THAT IS FULFILLED

In the synagogue at Nazareth, the Old Testament Scriptures were read every Sabbath Day. What was different about the particular day in our reading? Jesus was there. He had come to attend church in his hometown. By standing up he indicated that he wanted to read the Scriptures and explain them.

Every eye in the synagogue was focused upon him. Jesus had grown up in Nazareth—spending the first 30 years of his life there. By word of mouth, the people knew that he was a rabbi. Through his preaching and miracles, he had already attracted a great deal of attention elsewhere. So they were more than eager to hear what he had to say.

The clerk handed Jesus the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, which contained the reading for that day. Jesus read the passage. It clearly spoke of the long-awaited Messiah. And then he stated the theme for his sermon: "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

The book of Isaiah is filled with prophecies concerning the Christ, the Messiah—from the miraculous manner in which he would come into the world to the bitter suffering he would endure and the

shameful death he would die. And the words Jesus read described a ministry that he himself was to fulfill—a ministry that reconciled the sinner with his God.

At his baptism Jesus was anointed "with the Holy Spirit and power" (Acts 10:38). He preached to those who realized their spiritual bankruptcy and needed the riches of his grace. To those who were imprisoned in their sins—he pronounced freedom from guilt and punishment. To those who lived in spiritual darkness—he turned on the light of God's truth.

Isaiah had prophesied all of this in the words Jesus had read. Jesus now applied those words to himself as proof that he was that Messiah.

Today our message and ministry are essentially the same. The good news of our Father who loves us and his Son who redeemed us is our comfort and joy.

When we read the Old Testament, let us see Christ, who has been prophesied there. When we read the New Testament, the word *fulfilled* repeatedly jumps out at us during the life and ministry and death of Christ. Through the pages of Scripture we find Christ, the fulfiller of every prophecy and the keeper of every promise.

Dear Lord Jesus, help us make every day a Sabbath whereby we find rest for our souls through your precious, saving Word. Amen.

All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. (Luke 4:22)

### A WORD THAT AMAZES

Jesus' sermon seemed to have made a favorable impression—at least at first. His message and his mannerisms seemed to appeal to his hometown people.

When we read, "All spoke well of him," it's much like each of us commenting, "I enjoyed your sermon, Pastor" or "Nice job, Pastor" after the service.

When a minister has faithfully expounded the biblical text in his presentation, he doesn't take such remarks as a compliment for his oratorical skills. Rather, he considers them expressions praising God for his Word and for his God-given ability to proclaim it.

When we're told that the people "were amazed at the gracious words that came from his [Jesus'] lips," the Bible means that the people were pleased with what they were hearing. For Jesus used the words of Isaiah to identify himself as the One of whom the prophet was speaking. And hopefully the people would begin to see God's great love now that the Christ had come to them.

Matthew explains their amazement by noting that the people asked, "Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous

powers?" (13:54). Jesus' words did not astonish them because they were overjoyed at hearing of the grace of God in Christ. Rather, they marveled that such a seemingly uneducated man could speak so well and demonstrate such wisdom.

Sad to say, the people did not believe that grace and truth had come to Nazareth that day. For grace only comes through Christ, and the truth is found only in the Scriptures.

Because we are by nature dead in our sins and controlled by them, because the holy God sees only sin in even the best of people, it is truly a wonder that God loved the world so much that he would sacrifice his Son to redeem it. And that is amazing grace!

But grace is amazing only to those who know how spiritually wretched and helpless they are. Grace is amazing only to those who know Christ as their Savior.

Isn't it amazing that, through Christ, God is our Father and we are his dear children? Isn't it amazing that we have a perfect home in heaven ready and waiting for us? Now and for all eternity we can sing of Christ's amazing grace.

**Amazing grace—how sweet the sound—that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see. Amen. (CW 379:1)**

All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. "Isn't this Joseph's son?" they asked. (Luke 4:22)

### A WORD THAT IS DOUBTED

Wily Satan is at it again. He first sowed the seeds of doubt in the mind of Eve: "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'" (Genesis 3:1). He lied, contradicted God, and deceived Eve. He managed to put doubt into her mind—doubt that led to her unbelief and disobedience. After all, doubt is the first step toward unbelief.

As the Nazarenes began to realize the full meaning of Jesus' divine claims, their sinful reason prompted them to ask, "Isn't this Joseph's son?"

They had known Jesus since he was a child. He had grown up in their midst and had gone to school with their sons. As far as they could tell, he was no different than any of them. A person of such humble origins could hardly be the Messiah.

The lifesaving words of Jesus had knocked powerfully at their hearts. But the words fell on shuttered hearts, dead hearts. No change took place. The Nazarenes' unbelieving thoughts carried the day: "Did he really mean to say that he was the Messiah? How could that be? Yes, he's an intelligent, clean-cut, polite young man.

But he's Joseph the carpenter's son—and that's all he is. So how can he be the Messiah, promised and sent by God?"

Their attitude about Jesus' person and mission may surprise us. We know from the Word of God that Jesus is the Son of God, who became man when he was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin mother. We believe that he came into this world to seek and to save us. We confess that not only the words of Jesus in the Bible are God's Word but that the Holy Spirit has also verbally inspired all Scripture. No doubt about it.

But that doesn't mean we too don't have our moments of doubt. Haven't you ever stopped in your reading of the Scriptures only to say, "How could that be true? Why would God let that happen?"

Or haven't there been terrible times in your life when you said to yourself: "Why, God, is this happening to me?"—thereby questioning God's wisdom and love?

Daily we need the Word of God to strengthen our faith and to help us pray, "Lord, I believe; please help me overcome my doubts."

**Dear Lord Jesus, continue to send your Spirit into my heart through your Word, so that I may safely pass through the trials of life. Amen.**

Jesus said to them, "Surely you will quote this proverb to me: 'Physician, heal yourself! Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.' I tell you the truth," he continued, "no prophet is accepted in his hometown. I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian." (Luke 4:23-27)

### A WORD THAT HEALS

Jesus read the thoughts of his neighbors' hearts that prompted their unbelief: "Prove to us that you're the one you claim to be. Prove you have the authority to make such claims for yourself. Show us that you're more than the son of Joseph. Perform some miracles here . . . in our presence . . . just as many as you did in Capernaum. Do that and you'll have our respect and recognition—we'll believe your claim to be the Messiah pictured by Isaiah."

But Jesus refused to yield to their demand that he prove that he was the Messiah. Instead, he cited two warning examples from the Old Testament Scriptures to show them what would happen to them if they persisted in their unbelief. In the one instance God sustained a gentile woman by a miracle—but performed no miracles to help the thousands of widows in Israel at the time. In the other example God miraculously

healed the Syrian general Naaman, a Gentile, of his leprosy but performed no miracles to help the thousands of lepers in Israel.

"The people of Judah, living at the time of the great prophets Elijah and Elisha," Jesus would say, "forsook the Lord. They refused to listen when the prophets called them to repentance. Through their impenitence they forfeited the merciful help of God."

"You people of Nazareth reveal the same spirit. You have despised the greatest of all prophets, the Messiah himself, and have scorned his message. You've hardened your hearts in unbelief. So you're not going to receive any special treatment from me. I'm not going to perform any miracles for you or heal your ills and afflictions. In fact, God's grace is going to be taken from you and given to the Gentiles."

May the Lord help us learn and listen and believe and obey!

**Lord, have mercy on us. Amen.**

All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him down the cliff. But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way. (Luke 4:28-30)

### THE WORD THAT INFURIATES

What made the people of Nazareth so furious? Jesus had used the Old Testament to establish his claim that he was the Messiah. He had also told them that he wasn't going to perform miracles for them simply to substantiate his claim and that if they continued to reject him and his message, God's gift of salvation would pass on to the Gentiles.

But they refused to believe him or in him. They understood full well what Jesus was saying, but they wouldn't submit to the truth. Because they didn't believe God or his Word, they became angry with Jesus, who proclaimed it to them.

What angers people today? When it comes to religion, it's often the truth of God's Word.

Most of the people in our society imagine that all religions are good and that no one can have exclusive rights to the truth. "We all worship the same god, don't we?" they claim. And by "we" they mean Christians, Jews, Muslims—in fact, anyone who speaks of god in a reverent way.

False religions, however, deny that Jesus is God. They refuse to accept what the Bible teaches

about Christ. All should "honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him" (John 5:23).

When we bear witness, as the apostles did, that "there is no other name [Jesus] under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12), the world mocks us. When we teach that there is no other God but the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and that any other god which people might choose to worship is an idol, people are infuriated.

God's Word teaches we are saved alone by God's grace through faith in Christ. Neither our natural character nor our good deeds bring us one inch closer to God and our salvation. For that truth the unbelieving despise us. They are convinced—wrongly so—that who they are and what they do makes them right with God.

Holding to the truth and witnessing to the world invites contempt. But be strengthened with Christ's words, "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first" (John 15:18).

**Lord, make me your faithful witness. Amen.**



But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way. (Luke 4:30)

### A WORD THAT SAVES

"He saved others . . . but he can't save himself" (Matthew 27:42), his enemies mockingly said of Jesus as he hung on the cross. But they were wrong. When the people of his hometown were ready to kill him because he claimed to be the promised Christ, "he walked right through the crowd and went on his way."

They wanted him to perform a miracle as proof of his divine origin. And he did—for they were unable to lay a hand on him. But the people were so agitated because of their unbelief that they didn't recognize that miracle.

Why couldn't they harm him on that day? When Jesus told his disciples that he was the Good Shepherd who would lay down his life for the sheep, he explained, "No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord" (John 10:18). To die in Nazareth at that time and at the hands of the people was not the way his Father had planned it from eternity.

Through the prophets, God's people were told how God would keep his promise to save them.

Lord, open now my heart to hear, and through your Word to me draw near. Let me your Word e'er pure retain; let me your child and heir remain. To God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit, Three in One, Shall glory, praise, and honor be now and throughout eternity. Amen. (CW 282:1,3)

Jesus would redeem mankind from the curse of the law "for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree'" (Galatians 3:13).

Also, he would be "numbered with the transgressors" (Isaiah 53:12). His enemies would divide his "garments among them and cast lots for [his] clothing" (Psalm 22:18). He would be "assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death" (Isaiah 53:9). And not one of his bones would be broken (Psalm 34:20)—hardly a possibility if he had been thrown off a cliff.

Jesus saved himself on that day so that he could redeem us according to God's Word on another day, a day already selected by his Father.

It's the message of a crucified and risen Christ that has the power to save. And that message is only found in the Holy Scriptures. The Word has brought us to faith and keeps us in the true faith. For the gospel Word alone "is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16).

Then he went down to Capernaum, a town in Galilee, and on the Sabbath began to teach the people. They were amazed at his teaching, because his message had authority. (Luke 4:31,32)

### A WORD THAT HAS AUTHORITY

After he left Nazareth, Jesus went to the city of Capernaum and "began to teach the people" there. As a visiting rabbi, he was invited to be the preacher of the day. As in Nazareth, the people were "amazed at his teaching."

Was it because he was such a good speaker? Or was he saying things that the people had rarely heard before?

The rabbis who taught in the synagogues focused on the law, especially on the outward side of the law. They brought in countless man-made laws and ordinances—the commandments of men they had substituted for God's teaching—thereby burdening the consciences of the people. The rabbis had lost the gospel and God's mercy. And the Messiah that the rabbis asked the people to look forward to was only to be some Jewish warrior or hero who would free the Israelites from their earthly oppressors. No wonder their message left the souls of their hearers empty and bare.

But Jesus came with a different message, one that would bring peace to their hearts and rest for their souls. He invited them to trust in the true and living God, who is a friendly and loving Father. He spoke of God's

gracious deliverance from their real enemies—sin and Satan.

He could speak with authority not only because he was the Son of God but also because what he taught were the sure promises that God revealed to their forefathers. Yes, his message to the people was always firmly grounded in the Word of God.

And if Jesus were among us today, his message would be the same—our sin and God's grace—a message that has authority.

And what gives the message we hear today authority? Is it the forceful words of the preacher? Some profound thought he's expounding? A display of his intellect?

The apostle Paul was a learned man, and yet he assured the Christians of his day, "My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power" (1 Corinthians 2:4,5).

To every faithful minister of Christ, he has given the assurance, "He who listens to you listens to me" (Luke 10:16). As long as we preach the Word, neither adding to nor subtracting from it, we have a message of authority.

**Lord, thank you for making your Word the power and authority in my life. Amen.**

About eight days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray. As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem. (Luke 9:28-31)

## THE LORD OF LIFE SPEAKS ABOUT HIS DEATH

"About eight days after Jesus said this, he . . ." Now that's the kind of sentence that stops our reading in its tracks—isn't it? There's a definite link between what we're about to read and something that happened roughly a week before it. We won't fully understand what happens next unless we recall what happened earlier. So what is it that preceded and directly affected this spectacular transfiguration event?

Just six verses earlier we hear Jesus say, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life" (Luke 9:22). Then he went on to add some words about the life and death of his followers: "If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels" (9:26).

So the day of Jesus' glorious transfiguration took place in close connection to a day on which he had told his disciples about his approaching suffering and death and resurrection. And it was also closely linked to what he had said about the future of his disciples—linked to him they would one day share his glory.

Amid all the "spectaculars" of that day—the glowing face, the shining clothes, the presence of Moses and Elijah—the center of attention for Jesus was "his departure." And that had been his topic all week long. His departure was by the way of the cross. Because there he bore the guilt of the sins of the entire world, we too may be sure that we have been cleansed of our guilt. Because of his departure we can calmly depart this life with the sure hope of life with our Savior in heavenly glory.

May our center of attention be and remain the departure of our Lord Jesus!

**Lord Jesus, by your death you won life for us. Teach us to live for you now and to die in the confidence that you have triumphed over death and hell. Amen.**

As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. (Luke 9:29)

### PRAYER CHANGES THINGS

Things certainly changed as Jesus prayed! The appearance of his face, his clothes, his companions—they all changed. That must have been some prayer!

Do we perhaps wish that the words of that prayer were recorded for us—so that we could perhaps capture and copy and repeat the combination of sounds, the magic formula he used? That would be folly indeed!

The prayers Jesus prayed need not be a mystery to us. Though many times it is simply reported that Jesus “went off to a solitary place, where he prayed” (Mark 1:35), there are other occasions where his prayers were recorded. His prayers were filled with praise (Matthew 11:25) and thanks (John 11:41). His prayers were for his Father’s will to be done (Luke 22:42) and for the safety of believers (John 17). And when he taught us the Lord’s Prayer, he surely made plain his idea of what prayers should be like.

Did he, and should we, pray for spectacular changes like those that happened on the Mount of Transfiguration? Consider what happened as Jesus prayed. The disciples had their faith strengthened. And the witness they bore continues to strengthen the faith

of believers. If on that day the Father chose to answer Jesus’ prayer for these blessings with spectacular changes, that is his wisdom and grace. We praise and thank him for it. We can hardly demand it for our own prayers.

That points to the doubt that looms when we say, “Prayer changes things.” We know very well the words of the prayers we pray. We select them carefully; perhaps we write them down or memorize them. We too pray that faith may be strengthened in us and in others.

But we don’t often see spectacular changes following our prayers. We don’t see dead men raised to life. We don’t see weakened bodies cleansed of disease. We don’t see broken relationships restored to harmony. We don’t even see immediate changes in ourselves (“Lord, give me patience—and do it now!”).

Have our prayers failed? Not at all. Perhaps it’s our eyesight that has failed. For who can see the peace of mind and heart that comes when we have laid our burdens on Jesus? Who can measure the joy of knowing that in all things our heavenly Father is working “for the good of those who love him” (Romans 8:28)?

Lord God, hear my prayers and answer them in your wisdom and power. For Jesus’ sake. Amen.

Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem. (Luke 9:30,31)

### DEAD MEN TALK WITH JESUS—AN AMAZING FACT!

Moses and Elijah had met with important people during their lives on earth. Moses had confronted the mighty pharaoh of Egypt to demand in the name of the Lord, "Let my people go." Elijah proclaimed to King Ahab the judgment of God: "There will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word" (1 Kings 17:1). Now they were meeting face-to-face with the Son of God made flesh and now transfigured to display his glory.

But centuries had passed since Moses and Elijah had last walked the earth. The record is plain. Moses "died there in Moab" (Deuteronomy 34:5). Elijah left this earthly life when a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared, and he "went up to heaven in a whirlwind" (2 Kings 2:11). By every meaning of earthly usage, these were dead men.

More than that, death came to them for the same reason it comes to every human being: "Sin entered the world . . . and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned" (Romans 5:12). Bold spokesmen for

God they may have been, but sinners they also were. The Bible records clearly their moments of doubt and weakness and failure.

Yet on the day of Jesus' transfiguration, Moses and Elijah "appeared in glorious splendor." What an amazing fact! What amazing evidence that Job was right when he confessed his faith in his Redeemer and applied to himself the forgiveness of sins given by him: "And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God" (19:26).

Death can't alter the fact that the glory of heaven, the glory of God, is intended by our gracious God to be shared with human beings. Sin may have thrown a monkey wrench into the works, but God's grace in Christ has repaired the damage. The final chapter will still reveal cleansed sinners interacting with God. The glory of heaven is intended also for human beings!

We are included, for the Word of God promises, "When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory" (Colossians 3:4).

Lord Jesus, as we walk this earthly pilgrimage through toil and trouble, lift our hearts to the goal you have set for us. Comfort us with the hope of glory shared with you—for that is the purpose of your life and death and resurrection. Amen.

Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem. (Luke 9:30,31)

### DEAD MEN TALK WITH JESUS—AN AMAZING SUBJECT

Have you ever tried to imagine what it will be like to live in heaven? All the believers will be there along with the holy angels and the Lord God himself. What an autograph collector's opportunity!

Think of all the celebrities we will meet. We could ask David for some lessons on how to sling stones. We could ask Peter to tell us some fish stories. We could ask Elijah what it's like to see your sacrifice be consumed by fire falling from heaven. We could ask Moses how heavy those stone tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments were.

But then reality sets in. The example of Moses and Elijah is before us. They didn't question one another. They didn't talk to the disciples. They certainly didn't pray to one another or encourage the disciples to do so! They focused on Jesus and his work of redemption.

That is also the actual picture the apostle John recorded of life in heaven. Angels sing: "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and

wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!" Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!" (Revelation 5:12,13) Our joy in heaven will be our Savior-God, not our companions, marvelous though they will be.

As we solemnly gather on this Ash Wednesday to worship our Savior, we properly mourn our sins, for it was our guilt Jesus bore in his suffering and death. But our solemn repentance is not the gloom of despair! We, like Moses and Elijah, know something about that departure which our Lord brought to fulfillment at Jerusalem. By that sacrifice he won salvation for Moses, for Elijah, for all the children of Adam—for us! We will spend a blessed eternity praising him for this. We can already spend this lifetime rejoicing in him, trusting in his care, praising him for his grace.

When I survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of glory died, my richest gain I count but loss and pour contempt on all my pride. . . . Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all. Amen. (CW 125:1,4)

Peter and his companions were very sleepy, but when they became fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him. As the men were leaving Jesus, Peter said to him, "Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." (He did not know what he was saying.) (Luke 9:32,33)

## HEAVEN IS NOT FOR THIS EARTH

As they rubbed the sleep from their eyes, the three disciples saw the glory of the transfigured Lord Jesus. It wasn't a dream. To the extent their human eyes could bear it, Jesus let his disciples see the glory that is his as the eternal Son of the Father, the glory he laid aside to walk the earth as the Son of Man.

This experience for the disciples was a promise of a world beyond this world, a foretaste of the blessedness of heaven, of what it would mean to be with Christ in all his glory.

When Peter noticed that Moses and Elijah were about to withdraw, that the heavenly vision might vanish, he made an attempt to prolong the experience. He felt that this experience was like heaven on earth. He felt so blessed and content in this heavenly radiance of the Lord and in the fellowship of these perfected believers that he had but one thought—holding on to it all.

So he suggested that the disciples take branches from the trees and make three shelters (booths, temporary dwellings) for

Jesus and Moses and Elijah. Peter's suggestion, of course, was foolish. Why would people in this exalted state need shelter? How could anything add to the glory before his eyes?

Yet we can understand the feeling that overwhelmed Peter—though, for the most part, we're so wrapped up in the things of this world that we forget the glory that awaits us.

But to be with Jesus forever is certainly the goal of our existence—while we walk this sin-cursed world, we can barely comprehend having a share of that glory. We can't translate the glories of heaven, as Peter wanted to, into this world shrouded in the darkness of sin and transgressions. And we must remember that, especially in times of suffering, when we hope—perhaps almost in desperation—for that time of glory to come.

But that time is not here yet. This is a glory that remains in the future. This is a glory that awaits the fulfillment of God's divine plan and God's final appointment with us.

Lord, when you come or when you call us home to yourself, may that glory which you have promised be fully ours. Amen.

While he was speaking, a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. A voice came from the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him." (Luke 9:34,35)

### THE WORD OF LIFE: LISTEN TO HIM

Can a cloud say something? Sure, when God speaks from it! This is more than a satellite picture of cloud formations that tells us a hurricane is forming. This is more than a scene on the desktop of a computer that cheers us with a pleasant picture of white clouds against the blue sky. Scripture tells of more than one momentous occasion when God spoke from a cloud. Think of Mount Sinai and the baptism of Jesus, for example.

So it was on the day of Jesus' transfiguration. God's voice was heard. That voice from a cloud carried a great impact. Its message was important. Its message was clear: "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him."

Hearing that message we can do no better than to echo Peter's words from an earlier occasion: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God" (John 6:68,69).

Listening to Jesus is God's will for us. That is what makes Bible

reading so precious to us. Whether it's personal study, a Bible class with others, our regular worship times—any time spent listening to the Son of God is God's gift.

Make no mistake. Listening to God's voice is possible even when we can't sit with Jesus on a hillside in Galilee. Jesus took it for granted that if Moses and the prophets wrote it in the Old Testament, God said it (for example, Mark 7:10,13). Jesus made the link between what he said during his ministry on earth and what we read in the New Testament when he said: "All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you" (John 14:25,26).

We listen to the Word of God with the confidence that "prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21).

**How precious is the Book divine, by inspiration giv'n! Bright as a lamp its doctrines shine to guide our souls to heav'n. Its light, descending from above our gloomy world to cheer, displays a Savior's boundless love and brings his glories near. Amen. (CW 284:1,2)**



A voice came from the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him." . . . The disciples kept this to themselves, and told no one at that time what they had seen. (Luke 9:35,36)

### TIME TO SPEAK OUT?

Can you keep a secret? We like to flatter ourselves by saying that we can.

Should you keep a secret? When a friend is deceiving parents, stealing from an employer, rejecting our appeals to turn from sin, it can be wrong not to speak up (see Matthew 18:15-18).

But where do Peter, John, and James fit? They were blessed to see and hear wondrous things on the Mount of Transfiguration. Others would also benefit from hearing what the Father's voice proclaimed: "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him." Jesus is the Christ, the one chosen to redeem sinners from their guilt. Forgiveness, peace, and life eternal are his gracious gifts. Let lost sinners hear that good news!

Yet there is "a time to be silent and a time to speak" (Ecclesiastes 3:7). Mark records that our Lord himself told Peter, John, and James that this was not yet the time for them to speak about what they had seen (9:9). The

reason is plain when we remember Peter's idea of building three shelters: "He did not know what he was saying" (Luke 9:33).

But that is hardly true anymore! Not for Peter! Not for us! This is God's Son. We won't be misled by the Sanhedrin, nor by any doubters. The Son of God walked to his death bearing the guilt of our sins. He walked through death to life, assuring us that we will follow.

These truths we know. These truths we are to speak about, to share! For Jesus' Word to us is: "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned" (Mark 16:15,16).

We know what time this is. Today is not the time to be silent but to speak. With Peter we confess: "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

Almighty God, grant to your Church the Holy Spirit and the wisdom that comes from above. Let nothing hinder your Word from being freely proclaimed to the joy and edifying of Christ's holy people, so that we may serve you in steadfast faith and confess your name as long as we live, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. (CW page 25)

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10:45)

### JESUS CHRIST—SUFFERING SERVANT

Imagine that you're on death row set to be executed for your crimes—a "dead man walking" in prison lingo. A call from the governor comes through. You're to be set free. Someone has volunteered to die in your place. Impossible? Seemingly so. Good news? Indeed! Lifesaving news!

But that radical impossibility is just what Christ offers us. As he stands in front of our Lenten mirror and interprets his life for us, Jesus reminds us that he came into this world for a very specific purpose: "to give his life as a ransom for many." A ransom is a payment to release someone from bondage. That's exactly what we see Jesus doing as he travels the path of his Lenten pilgrimage.

That's why he endured the hatred of the world. That's why he willingly went to the cross. That's why he suffered and died. He wanted to set us free from the prison of sin and the bondage of death. He gave his life as a ransom that we might have the gift of eternal life.

He did not come in all his glory to *lord* it over men as the Lord of

lords and the King of kings. No, he came—not to be served but to serve. He came as the Suffering *Servant*, as Isaiah had portrayed him long ago.

Christ's life had a very definite mission and purpose. What about yours and mine? Are we here simply to be served? to allow others to serve us? to make our lives as comfortable and leisurely as possible?

Or do we, like our Lord, serve others? Are we truly concerned about the souls of the loved ones God has placed in our care? about the others who have not as yet come to know this breathtaking good news—that Christ came to give his life as a ransom for all men's sins?

Are we willing to make every sacrifice to make this possible? Are we ready to risk the loss of love from those near and dear to us if we need to confront them with their sin and their need of a Savior? Are we ready to risk ridicule as we confront fellow workers with the gospel of Christ?

Christ died to save us. May we die to ourselves to set his saving sacrifice before all people.

Lord, you sacrificed yourself to set me free. Empower me now to serve you. Amen.

The high priest asked him, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?" "I am," said Jesus. (Mark 14:61,62)

## JESUS CHRIST—SON OF GOD

Christ is true God; an angel announced it: "The holy one to be born will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35).

Christ is true God; God the Father declared it: "This is my Son, whom I love" (Matthew 3:17).

Christ is true God; his miracles showed it—the power over material things, sickness, the elements, and over death itself was his to command.

Christ is true God; his teachings revealed it: "The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority" (Mark 1:22).

Christ is true God; his disciples recognized and acknowledged it. Thomas bowed before him and said, "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28). Peter confessed, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16). John was led to write, "He is the true God and eternal life" (1 John 5:20).

Christ is true God; he himself claimed it: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). And when Caiaphas put the solemn oath of Jewish testimony to him—and we recall that as he answered his life hung

in the balance—Jesus responded, "I am."

Remember, Jesus wasn't put on trial before the Sanhedrin for something he'd done. He was on trial because of who he claimed to be. So Jesus knew it meant death to answer Caiaphas. But answer he did. A straightforward, clear-cut answer established under oath in a court of law—an answer that left no doubt about his deity: "I am"—I am the Christ, the promised Messiah, the true and living Son of God.

Jesus answered *for our benefit*—only the Son of God could be the Savior of the world. Jesus had to be true God so that his fulfilling of the law might be sufficient for all men and his life and death a sufficient ransom for our redemption. That's why the Father chose to send Jesus, his one and only Son, to suffer and die. There was no other way for us poor, miserable sinners to be saved.

Accept this truth in faith by the power of the Holy Spirit and live! Reject it, like Caiaphas, and deny—not the truth—but God's gift of eternal life. Look to Christ and only to Christ for your salvation!

**Most gracious God, lead me to appreciate what it means that the Son of the living God died for me. Amen.**

Pilate . . . asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. . . ." "You are a king, then!" said Pilate. Jesus answered, "You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. . . ." "What is truth?" Pilate asked. (John 18:33,36-38)

## JESUS CHRIST—KING OF TRUTH

"What is truth?" That sarcastic question of Pilate's sounds strangely modern. The postmodern age in which we live questions whether there is anything such as absolute truth. To modern man—man come of age, as he likes to think of himself—*everything is relative*.

For modern man there are no moral absolutes such as the Ten Commandments. Rather, he operates with a system of situational ethics—where right or wrong is determined by the state in which a person finds oneself.

For modern man, what one believes about God and man and salvation and the universe is not as important as the *sincerity* with which a person holds one's beliefs. In other words, *what* you believe is not important as long as you are sincere about what you believe.

But to Jesus, objective, factual truth was a vital reality. "For this reason I was born," he tells Pilate, "and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth."

"Yes, I am a king," Jesus would tell Pilate, "but not a king in the ordinary sense. I am the King of truth. What I have spoken and taught, what I have revealed to man about God—that is the truth. That's the way things really are in God's sight. Through me men get to know God as he really is. Through me men get to know sin as it really is. But above all, through me men get to know of God's love and the way to eternal salvation.

"Now it may appear to you, Pilate, that you hold my life in your hands. The *truth* is that your life is in my hands. The *truth* is that all men are sinners and that I have come into the world to save them. The *truth* is that those who believe in me will join me at my right hand in glory. The *truth* is that those who reject me and the truth that has been revealed to them will become residents in Satan's fiery kingdom. *That is the truth*. There is no other way. There is no other outcome. There is no other truth."

Lord, keep us steadfast in your truth. Amen.

[Jesus] said to his mother, "Dear woman, here is your son," and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." (John 19:26,27)

### JESUS CHRIST—LOVING SON

For a moment this week our attention is shifted from the momentous words of Jesus that interpret his suffering and death to a very human word and a very human situation. At the foot of the cross stands Mary, Jesus' mother. What sorrow must have torn at her heart as she witnessed his suffering, the fulfillment of the prophetic words of Simeon: "And a sword will pierce your own soul too" (Luke 2:35). The cutting edge of that sword was now doing its diabolical work.

Jesus sees his mother. His heart goes out to her. In the midst of his own indescribable suffering—even while the winds of God's wrath swirl over and about his sinless soul—he is concerned about others, concerned about her. He makes provision for Mary's welfare. He calls his disciple John and asks him to provide for her.

During Lent our attention is centered on the cross of Christ, on the fact that he laid down his life for us that we might live eternally. But we dare never forget that what Christ did for us not only had a tremendous impact on *our* lives, it is also to reflect itself in the impact we have on the lives of others.

That is why this event is more than just a passing aside in the passion history of our Lord. For sometimes we act as if God is only concerned about spiritual things. But this word from the cross tells us that there is nothing on earth that the love of God does not touch, that it reaches down into every situation involved in life and living.

It's also an indication to us that we should never let our lives get so involved—even in doing the work of the Lord, if that be the case—that we forget about the welfare of others, especially those who are near and dear to us. The Lord also wants us to show loving concern for them.

Perhaps this Lent might be the time not only to rededicate our lives to the Lord but also to rededicate ourselves to those whom the Lord has placed most intimately in our care.

Children—follow the example of loving concern toward your parents the Lord set for you. Give your parents a hug—a big one. Honor them. Obey them. Care for them.

Parents—love your children in the Lord.

**Lord, teach me to love others as you have loved me. Amen.**

Jesus said, "I am thirsty." (John 19:28)

## JESUS CHRIST—TRUE MAN

Christians believe that Jesus is not only true God but also true man. The Bible tells us that the Son of God became true man. He was not God merely playacting as a man. He was not God disguised as a man. He was an ordinary tax-paying citizen. People looked at him with their eyes, heard him with their ears, touched him with their hands, watched him eat, saw him die, and buried him.

Jesus was born of a woman. He was born to live on our earth. His first home was a stable, because there was no room for him in the inn. He had to be taken care of like any other baby. He was a helpless child who had to be clothed and diapered and fed.

Jesus grew up like any other child. He was a baby and a boy and a teenager and a young man. He had to go to church and school. He had his tasks and chores to perform.

Like any other man he had physical needs. He became hungry, tired, and, as our text so dramatically emphasizes, grew thirsty and felt the pain that is common to all men.

He experienced all the emotions common to man. He broke

down and sobbed at the grave of his friend Lazarus. He felt joy. He ate our bread. He suffered every depth of suffering and died our death.

Jesus was true man with human body, with human feelings and actions, subjected to the same temptations, a man like any other man—but a man without sin.

Why? Why did the Son of the living God have to come down from his glorious throne in heaven and assume our human flesh? Christ had to be man in order to put himself in the place of sinful man under the law of God and perfectly fulfill that law for us. And he had to be true man in order to suffer and die in our place. That was God's way of reconciling a sinful world unto himself.

How often do we think of the steps the Lord took to humble himself and to what depths he had to descend in order to carry out God's plan of salvation? How often does it occur to us that he did this for us—for you, for me?

How often do the words steal to our lips to mirror the realization of our hearts, to whisper in holy awe, "Thank you, Lord, thank you"?

**Lord, wake my slumbering soul to realize all that you have done for me. Amen.**

One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." (Luke 23:39-43)

### JESUS CHRIST—GRANTER OF ETERNAL LIFE

The cross can be a symbol of life or death. That becomes evident when we look at the final moments of the two criminals crucified with Jesus. In a sense they are representatives of all mankind. The one represents those who reject the cross and the suffering Savior on it. The other represents those who cling in faith to him. The one with a sarcastic quip, "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" rejects everything a loving God has done for him. In the other is triggered the response of faith. And to him is granted the promise of eternal life.

Note how this came about. The one criminal readily confessed his guilt. "We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve," was his heartfelt confession. He accepts full responsibility for his life of sin. He makes no attempt to blame his parents, his companions, or society. He points the fin-

ger at himself and says, as it were, "Yes, Lord, I'm guilty."

Then he looks to Christ and Christ alone. "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." With these words he acknowledges Jesus as his Savior—he believes that even now the dying Christ is on his way to his eternal kingdom.

Notice the reception this penitent sinner receives from the Lord. "Today you will be with me in paradise." Today . . . this very day . . . this very day on which you are about to die . . . you shall be with me in heaven, in my eternal kingdom. With these clear-cut words, Jesus grants the gift of eternal life to this penitent sinner.

With these same words, the Savior would say to his believers of 2005: "The very day you die you will be with me. You will enter the gates of the eternal mansions I have prepared for you."

Believer, rejoice. His death is your victory. Your death is his paradise.

**Granter of eternal life, may this gift comfort and strengthen us in the dark moments of life. Amen.**

Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. (John 19:30)

### JESUS CHRIST—AUTHOR AND FINISHER OF OUR FAITH

"It is finished." God the Father had given his Son a task to perform for all people—one they could not do for themselves. He had asked his Son to save the world—to save them from the curse of sin. Now at the close of the three hours of darkness on Calvary, Jesus could report back to the Father, "It is finished"—I have accomplished what you asked me to do.

"It is finished." With that mighty cry of victory, the Savior signaled that the battle had been waged and won. The serpent's head had been crushed—the prince of hell deprived of his powers. Sin's dominion ended. Death vanquished.

"It is finished." That's the trumpet call of salvation. The Lamb of God sacrificed. Redemption purchased. The bill for our sins and transgressions stamped "paid in full." Forgiveness of sin for us and all men ensured. Salvation for all secured. Death now the gateway to the joys of heaven.

"It is finished." Christ's dying word makes it crystal clear that we are saved by grace. There's nothing left for us to do in order to

obtain salvation. Everything that had to be done to bring us forgiveness, life, and salvation has been done. "You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins," the angel told Joseph (Matthew 1:21). There was only one way for that to be accomplished, and now it was.

"It is finished." The day will come when our lives are finished. By the power of the dying cry of him who is the Author and Finisher of our faith, we will wake up in heaven to see finally and forever the full plan of God completed for us and in us.

"It is finished." With this word Jesus hands over to us everything we need for standing before the throne of God on the day we all have to meet him face-to-face.

"It is finished." This is the password to eternal life. Between that hour and this present one we can live by faith in his cry. We can face the world unafraid. We can follow wherever he will lead us. Our destiny is sure. Our destiny is certain.

The work of God is finished. It is done. It is now up to us to bring that message to the world.

**Gracious Lord, nothing in my hand I bring, simply to your cross I cling.  
Amen.**



You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. (John 15:16)

## DISCIPLES REMAIN DEPENDENT ON THE LORD WHO CALLED THEM

Christ has called us into discipleship. He has chosen us, separated us from the world, and brought us into a personal relationship with himself and the heavenly Father. In a very real sense, we are privileged members of the family of God.

With these privileges comes responsibility. Christ has sent us, much like his original disciples, out into the world. There we are to “bear fruit” that “will last”—that will stand the test of time. As his disciples we are to represent him in the world. Through his Word he shares his mind with us. In his Word he opens his heart to us and tells us of his plans—and gives us our marching orders.

But to truly remain his disciples and carry out the responsibilities he has given us, we need always to recognize our dependence on him. As Jesus himself said: “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

A branch on a grapevine has value and life and strength only

*because it is joined to the vine and only as long as it is joined to the vine. Once it's severely damaged or cut off, it's useless. It has no strength on its own. The vine gives the branches nourishment and strength for a definite purpose.*

Go back in history as far as you can, and you will find the truth of that statement. Adam and Eve lived in Paradise until . . . until they wanted to be independent of God. Abraham got into trouble only when he decided to take matters into his own hands and rely on his own ingenuity. The same holds true for Isaac, Jacob, Judah, Joseph, Moses, and the apostle Peter—just to name a few.

In Peter's life is spelled out most dramatically the dreaded lesson we all need to learn—that disciples on their own are failures.

By holding Peter's life up to our Lenten mirror and examining it closely, we will also see that the secret of being an effective disciple—a fruitful, fruit-bearing disciple—is to be continually dependent on the Lord, to be continually in contact with him through prayer, through Word and sacrament.

God of mercy, God of might, may all thought of independence from our hearts and minds take flight. Amen.

"Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. . . ." But he replied, "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death." (Luke 22:31-33)

### WHEN WE ARE SURE OF OURSELVES

Jesus had warned his disciples that all of them would fall away because of him. But Peter the Impetuous—the star graduate of the Galilean school of self-esteem and assertiveness—had replied, "Even if all the others should fall because of you, I'll never fall away." Even the Savior's specific warning that Satan would sift him like wheat did not disturb Peter's self-confidence.

Peter pushed these warnings from him as just so much nonsense. Confident in his own ability to stand up for Jesus and to remain faithful to him, he answered Jesus' warnings with a boast, "Even if I have to die with you, I'll never deny you."

Peter was sure—oh so sure—that he could withstand any temptation, any sifting, any attack of Satan by his own power. His willpower was strong enough, his courage daring enough to survive the severest ordeal, even to die with the Lord. Brother Andrew might wilt under pressure. Perhaps even James and John. But he, Peter? Never!

Does the story of Peter's undue confidence in his own strength and judgment and wisdom begin

to sound and look familiar as we hold the Peter mirror up to our own lives? Certainly by now we must be able to see in him much more than just a bit of ourselves.

How often haven't we resolved to be more devout Christians and to walk closer with God? And then some ordinary temptation comes along and our vow to stand firm with Christ evaporates with it. We leave home in the morning ready to take on the awesome forces of Satan and the world. Confident in our own strength, we feel nothing can move us. But we come home that evening humbled and ashamed. The merest opportunity to sin was enough to make us stumble. We fall again and again—all because we rely entirely on our own strength.

Now the Bible does encourage us to have confidence. The apostle Paul, for example, boasted, "I can do everything." But he added quickly, "through [Christ] who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:13). And that is the real lesson we all need to learn: "With might of ours can naught be done." But "a mighty fortress is our God," through him "our victory is won" (CW 200:1,2,4).

**Lord Jesus, teach us to rely not on ourselves but on your gracious and sustaining hands. Amen.**

Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked Peter. "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak." (Matthew 26:40,41)

### WHEN WE ARE SPIRITUALLY ASLEEP

A soldier on sentry duty doesn't dare to fall asleep. He keeps his eyes wide open for any unusual movement. He listens for the rustle of leaves, the crack of a branch. He knows that if the enemy catches him unaware, it could cost him his life.

Spiritual drowsiness may cost the Christian dearly. He too lives in enemy territory. Temptations abound like foes in ambush, lying in wait to take the careless Christian soldier off guard and rob him of his soul, or like hidden traps set to nail her as she wanders away from safe ground.

Temptation comes to us in the most unexpected ways. It may come as our minds wander across forbidden territory. It may simply stand before us, the product of our own evil thinking. It may come in the invitation of a close friend. It will come when our defenses are down, when we are not armed with the shield of faith and the sword of the spirit. And so Jesus admonishes us, "Watch and pray."

If the disciples had watched and prayed, they might not have succumbed to temptation. They

might not have failed so miserably when the test of loyalty came. They might not have folded under pressure and forsaken and denied him. Spiritual drowsiness had weakened them for the cosmic battle against sin and Satan that lay ahead and had opened the way for their defeat.

Prayer in this dark hour would have kept them in contact with God. Prayer would have plugged them into the resources of God. Prayer would have strengthened them—even as Christ had already found the strength to endure the bitter Gethsemane hours of his soul because he was constantly in touch with his heavenly Father.

When the lines of communication between us and God are not kept open, Satan may tap the line and send *his* messages into our hearts and minds. And Satan's voice has a very beguiling tone. It woos and whispers and soothes until drowsiness closes our eyes and shuts our ears. And we take our spiritual snooze, off guard, careless, indifferent—the weapons of Satan's arsenal fire. And we fall—dead . . . spiritually dead.

Yes, "Watch and pray."

**Lord, help us to fight the battle. Keep us vigilant and strong. Amen.**

But Peter followed him at a distance, right up to the courtyard of the high priest. (Matthew 26:58)

### WHEN WE ARE TOO FAR FROM CHRIST

After Jesus was arrested, Peter and the rest of the disciples scrambled for safety. They did exactly what Jesus had warned them they would do. Their swaggering bravado turned into cowardly flight. Their oaths of loyalty—"Till death do us part, Lord"—evaporated into the cold night air. When the pressure was on, when their lives were at stake, their first thoughts were of themselves, their safety, their own well being.

Peter was the first to become ashamed of his cowardly flight. He knew what he should do—turn right around and go back and take his place at Jesus' side. But he was terrified—and so he compromised. While his Lord was being led through the streets, Peter followed "at a distance"—"afar off" (KJV).

Skiping from pillar to post, Peter managed to stay close enough to see what was happening—yet far enough behind so he wouldn't be detected. His love for his Lord demanded that he follow. His concern for his own life demanded that his following be done "afar off."

How often have we not done the same? Lord, of course I'll follow you—but on my terms, not yours. Yes, Lord—but let me do it my

way. Of course, Lord—but not right now; my friends are looking. Lord, I'll follow you—but not too close. There are still some things in my life that I'm not ready to surrender to you—at least not right now. Otherwise I might get caught up in your spirit and example and put my time and money and even myself into spiritual ventures for you and your kingdom.

Does that resemble the way we follow Jesus? Following Jesus, but only "afar off"? Going to church, but only occasionally? Attending services, but with little heart or eagerness? Praying, but only when our lives are in danger or when one of our loved ones is seriously ill? Working for the Lord, but only when we're shamed into it or we can't find a good excuse?

Remember what happened to Peter when he followed afar off—yes, because he did so.

Hold up the Peter mirror once again and learn the lesson well. The further we are from Jesus, the greater our danger. The closer we are, the stronger our faith. Through Word, through sacrament, through prayer we need to keep in close contact with him who is the source of our life and all of our strength.

**Lord, always keep me attached to you. Amen.**

Now Peter was sitting out in the courtyard, and a servant girl came to him. "You also were with Jesus of Galilee," she said. But he denied it before them all. (Matthew 26:69,70)

## OUR SUFFICIENCY IS OF GOD

Peter entered the courtyard to await the outcome of Christ's trial. He did not realize that he was walking in on another trial—his own. The first witness who testified against him was the maid at the door. Little had Peter thought that the sneer of a mere servant girl would draw from him a denial of his Lord. But it did.

And once the suspicions and rumors about Peter had been aroused, they kept floating through the night air. He was challenged a second and a third time. Peter tried to bluster his way out of the trap that was slowly closing around him. He began to curse and to swear, saying, "I don't know what you're talking about . . . I don't know the man" (Matthew 26:70,72).

The fall of Peter is a dramatic picture of the weakness and frailty of every disciple. Peter had been with Jesus every day for the previous three years. He had been privileged to listen to the Lord, to talk with him, to take his problems to him. He had witnessed the Lord's miracles. He had seen the effect of the Savior's ministry on the hearts and lives of people.

One would think that his faith and courage would have carried him through this trial to a ringing confession of faith in his Lord. But in this hour of temptation, all he had heard and seen was forgotten. All his good intentions and promises and vows forsook him. The great apostle fell. And in his fall he left an awful lesson for disciples of every day: even the best of Christians are not sufficient of themselves; our sufficiency is of God. If we attempt to get through life relying solely on our own strength, then, like Peter, we will be offended and fall away in the hour of danger or trial or temptation.

Hold up the Peter mirror. Do you see all those people who failed—who denied their Lord? Who's that behind Peter? You know. It's you . . . and me.

But also remember this. Peter's failure found forgiveness and restoration in the love of Christ. That brings us the hope, the confidence, that in Christ our failures find forgiveness, that in Christ our lives can be made over and refashioned more like unto his own.

**Gracious Father, let us learn to rely solely on you. Amen.**

Simon Peter continued to stand and warm himself by the fire. Some men asked him, "Aren't you, too, one of his disciples?" Peter denied it by saying, "No, I'm not!" (John 18:25 *God's Word to the Nations*)

## IT'S EASY TO CONFESS CHRIST AMONG FRIENDS

It's easy to confess Christ when we're among our fellow believers—even to boast in their company that we love Jesus more than all the rest. Peter had done exactly that—several times. Yes, surrounded by his friends and fellow disciples, words of confession had leaped easily to his lips.

But now Peter was in an altogether different situation. He was out in the world, in unfamiliar surroundings, rubbing shoulders with the enemies of Christ. The fires of the world seemed so inviting and the places around them so comfortable. In his foolhardy courage he had rushed in where he had no call to be. He had thrown himself into danger and miscalculated his courage and backbone.

Now in the company of Christ's enemies he found it was easier to deny his Lord than to remain loyal to him. He had underestimated the power of ridicule, crowd pressure, and his own reluctance to be singled out for being different.

That same danger confronts us—not only when we insist on visiting the spiritual graveyards where we place our souls in peril

but even out in what today has become the pagan public square.

Fear is a potent weapon. So is ridicule. Can the Lord depend on us to stand up and be counted when his Word is characterized as made-up stories and myths from the ancient past? when our faith is portrayed as a crutch only weak-kneed people need? when God's commandments are replaced in our schools and courts by the more up-to-date rules and insights developed from psychology or sociology?

And what about peer pressure—the pressure of the crowd? Do we give in to the enemies of the Lord when they would lead us into ways contrary to God's will? Do we go along with the ways of the world because we are afraid to stand out as the exception? Do we have the guts to say no when that negative response is going to lose us a business contract, set us off from the rest of our neighborhood, or cause us to lose a place of position and prestige?

Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, Peter later on found the courage to take the same stand before friend and foe alike. May the same ever be said of us.

**God, give me the courage to state my God-given convictions at all times and in all places. Amen.**

The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times." And he went outside and wept bitterly. (Luke 22:61,62)

### LENT IS A TIME FOR TEARS

The crowing of the distant cock sounded like a bugle call in the ears of Peter. Suddenly the scene on the way to Gethsemane stood vividly before his mind. His own proud boasts. Christ's warning words. They had come true. Unbelievably, they had come true. Openly, repeatedly, he had done what his Lord had said he would.

It was at that moment that the Lord was being led through the courtyard. The Lord had heard. The Lord had heard the blistering denial . . . the foul oath that declared that Peter did not know him, did not want anything to do with him.

The Lord paused and looked straight at Peter—right into the very depths of his soul. What a look that must have been . . . a look of sorrow and reproach and yet a look of deep affection and loving concern . . . a look that rekindled the fires of Peter's affection and his former faith . . . a look that was the Savior at work.

A wave of regret swept over Peter. With tears streaming down

his face, Peter plunged for the gate of the courtyard. Outside he continued to weep bitterly—tears of profound sorrow, tears of sincere repentance. Plainer than words did those tears speak of shattered self-confidence, of shame and repentance, and of rekindled love.

No matter how you look at it, Lent is a time for tears. When Peter realized what he had done, he went out and wept bitterly.

When was the last time you wept over your sins? When was the last time you were so overwhelmed with a sense of your guilt that you got down on your knees and cried out, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner"?

Lent is a time for tears . . . a time for repentance and a time for a renewed and rekindled faith in God. When this Lent is over, will you still be the same old person? Or will the preaching of God's law and gospel have turned you into a new and living and vibrant man or woman or child of God?

Hold up the Peter mirror once more. What do you see now? A saint perhaps?

**Holy Spirit, wash me clean. Live in me. Work through me. Make my light shine. All to God's glory. Amen.**

## DAILY PRAYERS

**SUNDAY Morning** Gracious and merciful Father, thank you for the privilege of being a guest in your house today. In Word and sacrament you came to us and, for the sake of your Son, removed our sin and guilt. Thank you for this peace and forgiveness as well as for the joy of singing your praise with my fellow Christians. Send us home again inspired to love you more and serve you better. In Jesus' name. Amen.

**Evening** Thank you, dear Lord, for this day of rest and refreshment for our souls. Ease the burdens of all who cry to you. Care for the lonely. Comfort those who suffer pain and distress, who are troubled by grief and despair. Give them courage and joy, even when the hours of their lives are dim and dark. Into your hands we commit them and us. Amen.

**MONDAY Morning** O Holy Spirit, set a watch before my mouth and keep the door of my lips. Keep evil thoughts far from my heart. Let me neither think nor speak nor do evil against my neighbors. Help me to be loving and kind toward everyone, that I may follow the example of my Savior, for his sake. Amen.

**Evening** Precious Savior, as you draw the curtain closed on another day in my life, I am aware of your continual presence, which assures me of safety and blessings more numerous than I can count. Forgive all my sins. Grant me this night a peaceful conscience and restful sleep. Let no thoughts of worry disturb my slumber. Amen.

**TUESDAY Morning** Lord, I don't know what this day will bring. Only you know what lies ahead of me. By your sovereign power and tender love, turn my future, whatever it is, to eternal good. Guide me and guard me so that I do not become lost in sin and unbelief. Amen.

**Evening** Gracious Father, we have spent another day wrestling with the temptations of Satan, the world, and our own sinful flesh. Thank you for the victories. Forgive us for the defeats. Strengthen us against the renewed attacks we know will come. Give us a faith that does not stagger at the onslaughts of our enemies but that comes through victorious, relying on your strength. Amen.

**WEDNESDAY Morning** O Holy Spirit, you have made me God's child in Baptism through faith in Christ. Help me to live as God's child today, free from the power of sin. Help me to seize every opportunity that arises to show Christlike love to my family, my friends, my neighbors—to all I meet. Let my life show I am a child of my heavenly Father. Amen.



**Evening** O dear God, I sinned again today. How it saddens me when I think thoughts and say words and do things that displease you. There is so much in my life that needs to be changed. My comfort is your pardon, and I know I have it for Jesus' sake. My desire is for the gift of your Holy Spirit, that he may change the direction of my life and lead me in the paths you would have me walk. Amen.

**THURSDAY** Heavenly Father, as I meet other people today, help me to  
**Morning** treat them with love and kindness, ready always to forgive their sins, eager to help them in their needs. Use me as your instrument to bring them the message of salvation. Amen.

**Evening** My heavenly Father, help me in all my prayers to commit whatever grieves and worries me into your keeping. Supply those things I have need of. Accept my humble praise for all your benefits and blessings, which you have been pleased to grant for Jesus' sake. Be with me every hour of my life—on this day and all the days to come. Amen.

**FRIDAY** Sometimes, Lord, life is pretty frustrating. We encounter so  
**Morning** much hate and enmity and lovelessness as we try to live as your disciples. Give us patience and endurance when we are tempted to return evil for evil. Give us the strength to love those who have shown no love to us—as you did when you suffered and died for us—and to love those who have often proven so faithless and loveless to you. Amen.

**Evening** O Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, how gracious you have been to me this week, preserving me that I might be about my appointed tasks. Watch over me this weekend, and bless my leisure hours, keeping me and mine from danger, disease, sin, and unbelief. In his name who has redeemed me from every sin. Amen.

**SATURDAY** O God of all grace, we thank you for the gift of our salvation  
**Morning** through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Train our feet to walk constantly on the paths of discipleship, showing to others the same love and grace that we have received from your hands. Amen.

**Evening** O God, our rock and fortress, thank you for bringing us safely through another week. Strengthen our faith, and increase our love and hope that we may always stand ready to be called to our eternal home, which our blessed Savior has prepared for us. In his name we pray. Amen.

## SPECIAL PRAYERS

**ADVENT** Come, O precious Ransom, come, only Hope for sinful mortals! Come, O Savior of the world! Open are to you all portals. Come, your beauty let us view; anxiously we wait for you. Enter now my waiting heart, glorious King and Lord most holy. Dwell in me and ne'er depart, though I am but poor and lowly. Ah, what riches will be mine when you are my guest divine! Amen. (CW: 8:1,2)

**CHRISTMAS** Come, your hearts and voices raising, Christ the Lord with gladness praising; loudly sing his love amazing, worthy folk of Christendom. See how God, for us providing, gave his Son and life abiding; he our weary steps is guiding from earth's woe to heav'nly joy. Gracious Child, we pray you, hear us; from your lowly manger cheer us. Gently lead us and be near us till we join th' angelic choir. Amen. (CW 42:1,2,5)

**NEW YEAR** Help us, O Lord, for now we enter upon another year today. In you our hopes and thoughts now center; renew our courage for the way. New life, new strength, new happiness we ask of you—oh, hear and bless. May ev'ry plan and undertaking begin this year, O Lord, with you; when I am sleeping or am waking, help me, dear Lord, your will to do. In you alone, my God, I live; you only can my sins forgive. And may this year to me be holy; your grace so fill my ev'ry thought that all my life be pure and lowly and truthful, as a Christian's ought. So make me while I'm living here your faithful servant through the year. Amen. (CW 70:1-3)

**EPIPHANY** Songs of thankfulness and praise, Jesus, Lord, to you we raise, manifested by the star to the Magi from afar, Branch of royal David's stem, in your birth at Bethlehem. Anthems be to you addressed, God in man made manifest. Grant us grace to see you, Lord, mirrored in your holy Word. May our lives and all we do imitate and honor you that we all like you may be at your great epiphany and may praise you, ever blest, God in man made manifest. Amen. (CW 82:1,5)

**ASH WEDNESDAY** Jesus, I will ponder now on your holy passion; with your Spirit me endow for such meditation. Grant that I in love and faith may the image cherish of your suffering, pain, and death that I may not perish. If my sins give me alarm and my conscience grieve me, let your cross my fear disarm; peace of conscience give me. Help me see forgiveness won by your holy passion. If for me God slays his Son, God must have compassion! Amen. (CW 98:1,4)

**LENT** Grant that I Thy Passion view with repentant grieving nor Thee crucify anew by unholy living. How could I refuse to shun ev'ry sinful pleasure since for me God's only Son suffered without measure? Grant that I may willingly bear with Thee my crosses, learning humbleness of Thee, peace mid pain

and losses. May I give Thee love for love! Hear me, O my Savior, that I may in heaven above sing Thy praise forever. Amen. (TLH 140:4,6)

**FOR THE SICK AND OTHERS FACING TRIALS** Father in heaven, the hours are long and weary, and I am worried. I need your comfort and your peace. Fill my heart with the assurance of salvation through him who died for me and rose again. In your hands lies the power to heal me and relieve me of my distress. I ask you to come to me with your healing power. Bless the medicines and treatments prescribed for me. Bring me safely through this crisis. If it is your will, relieve me of my suffering. If not, give me strength to bear it. Into your hands I commit my body and soul. Amen.

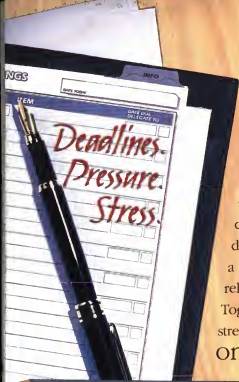
**A PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING AND PRAISE** As I look about me, dear Father in heaven, I see the work of your hands in the wonders of the universe, in the land and the sea, in the forests and fields, and in the body you have given me. For all of these, receive my heartfelt thanks. Amen.

**A PRAYER IN TIME OF TEMPTATION** You have promised me, O God, that you will never test me above that which I'm able to bear. So I turn to you in my weakness and ask for strength to resist and overcome the temptations placed in my way by Satan. Cause me to live a life of daily repentance, looking to Jesus for pardon and strength and the power to live a renewed life. Amen.

**HOLY COMMUNION** Thy Table I approach, dear Savior, hear my prayer; oh, let no unrepented sin prove hurtful to me there! Lo, I confess my sins and mourn their wretched nature; a contrite heart is sure to find forgiveness at Thy hands. Thy body and Thy blood, once slain and shed for me, are taken here with mouth and soul, in blest reality. Oh, may I never fail to thank Thee day and night for Thy true body and true blood, O God, my Peace and Light! Amen. (TLH 310:1-3,6)

**LUTHER'S MORNING PRAYER** In the name of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. I thank you, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, your dear Son, that you have kept me this night from all harm and danger. Keep me this day also from sin and every evil, that all my doings and life may please you. Into your hands I commend my body and soul and all things. Let your holy angel be with me, that the wicked foe may have no power over me. Amen.

**LUTHER'S EVENING PRAYER** In the name of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. I thank you, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, your dear Son, that you have graciously kept me this day. Forgive me all my sins, and graciously keep me this night. Into your hands I commend my body and soul and all things. Let your holy angel be with me, that the wicked foe may have no power over me. Amen.



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